

Author: Kureha
Illustrator: Yamigo



The Cat's Revenge

as Plotted from the
Dragon King's Lap



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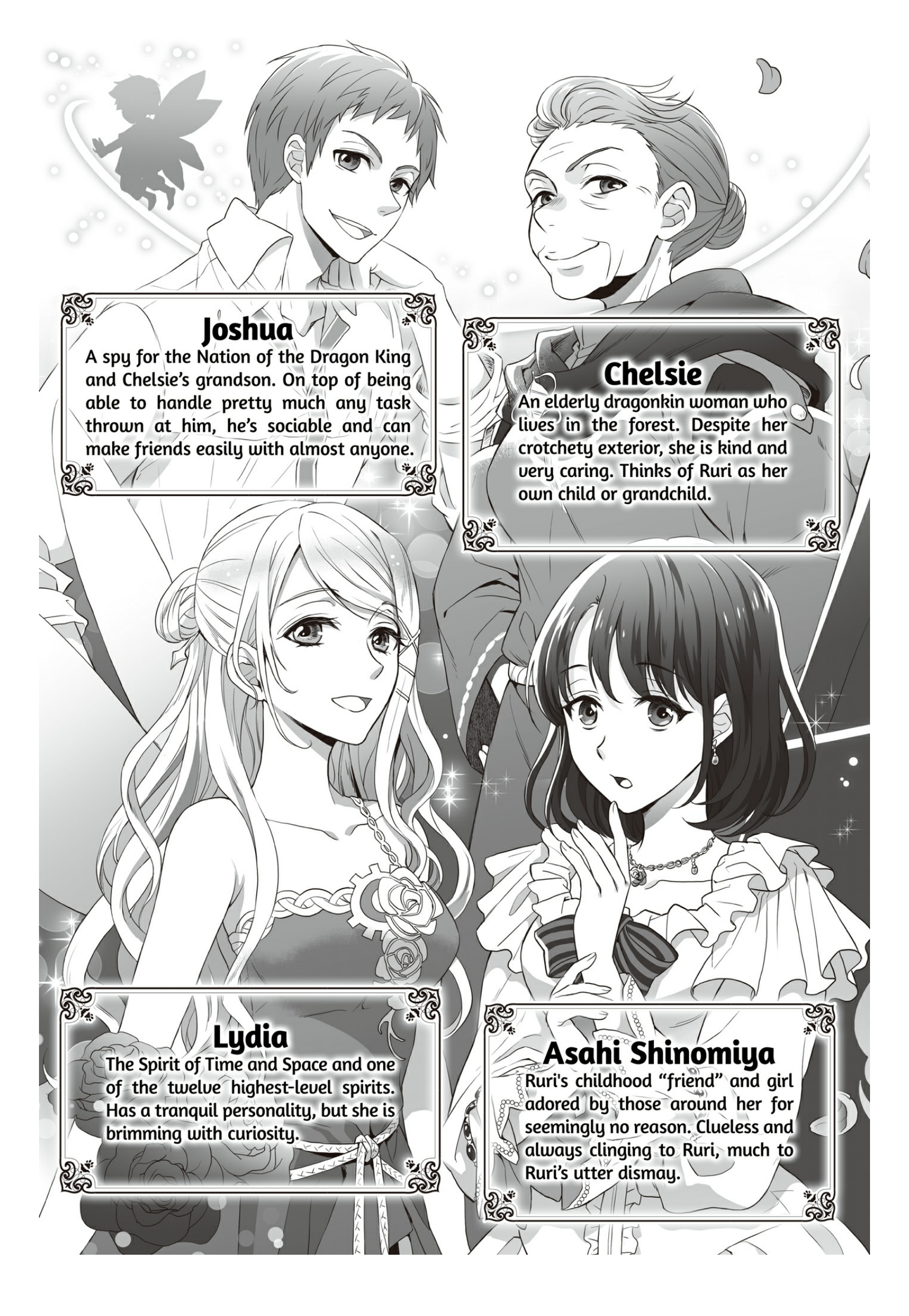
Jade

The young and wise ruler of the Nation of the Dragon King. Takes Ruri, a Beloved, into his care. In contrast to his cool and suave appearance, he has a soft spot for all things cute and cuddly.

Ruri Morikawa

The girl summoned to an alternate world after getting wrapped up in her childhood "friend's" nonsense. She is a Beloved, a person with mana that spirits find especially attractive. By putting on a special bracelet, she can transform into a white cat.

Character Introductions



Joshua

A spy for the Nation of the Dragon King and Chelsie's grandson. On top of being able to handle pretty much any task thrown at him, he's sociable and can make friends easily with almost anyone.

Chelsie

An elderly dragonkin woman who lives in the forest. Despite her crotchety exterior, she is kind and very caring. Thinks of Ruri as her own child or grandchild.

Lydia

The Spirit of Time and Space and one of the twelve highest-level spirits. Has a tranquil personality, but she is brimming with curiosity.

Asahi Shinomiya

Ruri's childhood "friend" and girl adored by those around her for seemingly no reason. Clueless and always clinging to Ruri, much to Ruri's utter dismay.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The Summoning](#)

[Chapter 2: The Exile](#)

[Chapter 3: The Witch of the Forest](#)

[Chapter 4: Power of the Spirits](#)

[Chapter 5: Spirit of Time](#)

[Chapter 6: The Marketplace](#)

[Chapter 7: The Bracelet](#)

[Chapter 8: The Medicinal Tea](#)

[Chapter 9: The Prank](#)

[Chapter 10: Journey](#)

[Chapter 11: The Dragon King](#)

[Chapter 12: The Home Visit](#)

[Chapter 13: The Beloved](#)

[Chapter 14: Coming to the Castle](#)

[Chapter 15: Joshua](#)

[Chapter 16: Mana Wavelengths](#)

[Chapter 17: Exploration](#)

[Chapter 18: Starting Work](#)

[Chapter 19: Unsettling Rumors](#)

[Chapter 20: The Truth](#)

[Chapter 21: True Identity](#)

[Chapter 22: The Reunion](#)

[Chapter 23: The Return](#)

[Bonus Short Story](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue

There existed a world similar to Earth yet, at the same time, radically different.

In this world, beast people, with the ears to match, were completely normal. The outlier here was Ruri, born and raised on Earth.

In this world, the Dragon Clan was considered the strongest out of all the races, with the Dragon King the most powerful among them—the same Dragon King that Ruri found herself presently on top of.

And, oddly, in the form of a cat, despite the fact that she was allegedly human...

“Your Majesty, if I could trouble you to quickly look over these documents, please.”

“Very well.”

As the back-and-forth transpired above her head, she peered out the window to see gigantic dragons flying around as if they owned the skies—the kind of thing she had only ever seen before in books and on TV back home.

That sight was enough to let her know that this was not Earth. At first, it had been astonishing enough to make her jaw unhinge and drop to the floor, but nowadays, she had come to accept it as part of the everyday scenery.

“I’ll be done in a bit, so be patient, okay?” said a deep and appealing voice from overhead, interrupting her absent-minded staring. As the Dragon King’s words went into her ears and he petted her chin, she found herself unconsciously purring from the delightful sensations.

Ruri, however, soon returned to her senses and thought to herself, (*Wait, how did I get here again...?*)

She was originally a simple girl going to college on Earth, so how did someone like her, who had been just enjoying the springtime of her youth, get roped into

this fantasy world? And sitting atop the lap of a king, to boot...?

Chapter 1: The Summoning

It had all started about two years ago.

Ruri Morikawa was a girl with an expat mother who worked as a model and a father who worked as a diplomat. With platinum blonde hair, the same as her mother's, a pair of lapis lazuli eyes that served as the basis for her name in kanji, and a Japanese face, this girl was born into a family with features that would make anybody pump their arms in triumph along with the other winners of the genetic lottery. However, it seemed as though that had used up most of her luck. Ruri was never able to live in any sort of peace. Instead, misfortune hounded her around every corner.

The start of these misfortunes, by Ruri's own account, was undoubtedly triggered by living next door to one girl—Asahi Shinomiya. Since childhood, Ruri had sustained all sorts of damage due to Asahi garnering followers by the droves.

One had to wonder how many times Ruri had imagined how her life would have been different if she and Asahi hadn't grown up together. Although Asahi and Ruri were the same age, not to mention both attractive from a young age, the people around them always coddled Asahi and singled her out for better treatment. Ruri was not by any means a bad-tempered child, but everyone favored Asahi for whatever reason—not just her teachers, but her classmates and their parents as well. The same people who pampered Asahi to a ridiculous degree would lash out at Ruri for similarly ridiculous reasons.

For instance: one time, Ruri got into a dumb squabble over toys with Asahi, and Ruri ended up the only one scolded. One would assume that since it was a spat between two children, both would be punished equally.

To add insult to injury, not only did Asahi secure her own toy, but she wanted Ruri's as well. Despite her protests, she was not only scolded but she was told to give her own toy to Asahi. Although she was still a child, she could feel how unreasonable this all was.

Still in tears, the young Ruri handed the toy over, which prompted everyone to look at her as if she'd finally done the right thing.

She had no idea why they always put Asahi's needs above her own. At the time, she was still very young, less angry over the situation and more suspicious over why she'd been singled out for this treatment in the first place.

There was another time, in grade school, when Asahi was envious over Ruri's beautiful blonde hair and decided to dye her own the same color. Seeing as how the grade school had banned hair dyeing on the basis of it being harmful to children's bodies, the teachers ended up talking to Asahi's parents to explain the issue.

Normally, it would be proper to warn their parents about letting their child dye their hair in the future after explaining the school's rules, but the one who ended up warned was the one person who wasn't to blame—Ruri. She was told that everyone wanted to dye their hair because of Ruri's hair—a completely spurious claim.

They demanded that Ruri make her hair black, explaining that dyeing your hair was prohibited in their school, which sent her jaw to the floor. Even though she tried to appeal, telling them that she was a natural blonde, the teachers wouldn't listen.

Ultimately, she decided on wearing a black wig instead, but as soon as Asahi saw that, she nonchalantly asked, "Ruri-chan, did your hair get darker, or is it just me?"

(And exactly whose fault do you think it is that I'm in this mess to begin with?!) Ruri thought resentfully.

There was yet another time when they were all on a field trip and Ruri managed to shake free of Asahi, who would usually try to attach herself to her hip for whatever reason, and had relished in her liberation. Once it was time for everyone to gather and it was clear that Asahi had gotten lost, teachers and students alike all started to blame Ruri, asking her why she wasn't keeping an eye on Asahi.

Ruri was Asahi's childhood friend, not her caretaker. It was supposed to be the teachers' job to keep watch over the students, so there was no reason why

they should be blaming Ruri, who was in a different party on the trip to begin with.

Between the foreign-looking Ruri and the cute and charming Asahi, with her very Japanese features, Asahi probably seemed more approachable. That was what Ruri had convinced herself of from a young age, but since she was the victim of such blatant and unrelenting favoritism, it was inevitable that her personality would get a little twisted as a result. In fact, she should have been praised for not going down the wrong path entirely.

And so, as the years rolled on and Ruri grew into a nineteen-year-old university student, the fateful day that would greatly change the course of her life came upon her.

“Great, the coast is clear,” Ruri said, confirming that Asahi was nowhere in sight before quickly slipping outside, locking the front door and fleeing her home like a bat out of hell.

Ruri and Asahi had gone to all the same schools because they were next-door neighbors. The moment she truly regretted not going to a private school came during her high school entrance ceremony. She remembered being taken aback when she heard that many of her former classmates had gone the private school route instead. They’d even managed to get accepted into fancy girls’ schools with outrageous tuition costs—schools that would be absolutely impossible for Asahi’s family to afford given their financial situation. With that in mind, Ruri had enrolled at a high school with high tuition, but, somehow, there Asahi had been...

When Ruri asked her why, she was met with the unfortunate answer, “‘Cause, it’s way better if I’m in the same school as you, Ruri-chan.” Ruri had reprimanded her, telling her to think about her parents’ finances, but she was met with a smile and a, “Oh, don’t worry. It’s fine.”

It had probably been an ordeal trying to raise the money, considering her father was a regular salaryman and her mother was a housewife, so Asahi should have been more considerate toward her parents. However, her parents were no exception to the favoritism rule; they probably worked their tails off because they spoiled Asahi rotten. Because of that, there she was, and Ruri’s

high school life ended up being a living hell. Ruri was practically begging, on the inside, for Asahi's parents to learn to discipline their own child.

For her next tactic, Ruri studied like a woman possessed in order to enroll in a prestigious school for the academic elite. When Asahi bombed the entrance exam, she found herself pumping her fists in triumph.

She even moved to an apartment complex close to her university in order to get as far away from Asahi as humanly possible, but, for some very odd reason, there Asahi was, moving into the same complex.

When asked, she explained, "I managed to get into a two-year university close to your university, and I figured that I might as well live in the same complex while I'm at it. It's just a shame that I couldn't get the apartment next door." It was an explanation, but...

(I finally thought I got away from her! Alright, who the hell was it?! Who told her which complex I'd be living in?!)

After that, the university became her place of respite, as it was the one place Asahi couldn't get into. She even went there on the days she didn't have class, but there was a high likelihood that she would be grabbed by Asahi on her way out and good-naturedly (to Asahi, at least) escorted to school.

To avoid that, she tried leaving her place later than usual, but she would somehow get nabbed, nonetheless. Case in point...

"Ruri-chan, wait up~!"

(I'm positive this girl has smelling and hearing on par with most wild animals.) Despite the beckoning of this she-devil, Ruri's pace didn't slow.

After catching up to Ruri's speedwalk, Asahi looked at her with her cheeks puffed out, sulky. "Geez, you *promised* that we would walk together whenever we had class."

(I sure as hell didn't make you any promises. You know damn well I said it wasn't necessary, but you ignored what I said and took the decision upon yourself anyway!) Ruri thought, cursing in her mind and trying to focus on walking and nothing else.

This was the countermeasure Ruri came up with to combat Asahi and her complete inability to listen to what Ruri said, no matter how many times she repeated herself.

(She's the air, nothing but the air...)

As she thought that, Asahi continued to blather on without paying the silent Ruri any mind. Her inability to read between the lines, and, for example, merrily chatter away to a person who was completely ignoring her, was so unusual that it should have been on the endangered species list. And Ruri wasn't ever going to talk to her so long as she had no reason to.

As Asahi's university drew near, a group consisting of three boys and one girl came their way, greeting Asahi with smiles on their faces. They were a group of classmates that Ruri knew from middle school. The second they saw Ruri standing next to Asahi, their expressions turned sour in an obvious manner.

"Hey, you're back at it again?"

"Asahi-chan, I know you can't just leave her alone because you're too nice, but you shouldn't associate with girls like her."

"Guys, stop saying things like that; Ruri-chan is my best friend."

(Wait, wait. Who is whose best friend? You're just talking out of your rear end.)

Ruri wanted nothing to do with her and tried to distance herself, but, for whatever strange reason, Asahi wouldn't tag along with the people fawning after her but instead stuck to Ruri despite the fact that she barely gave her the time of day.

Asahi always had a crowd around her—a crowd that was, of course, composed of people who worshiped Asahi like they were some sort of religious organization. From their perspective, Ruri, who Asahi treated like her best friend, was nothing more than a thorn in their sides and a threat.

This was how it went: anyone who didn't spend time with Asahi saw how odd everything was and would look at Ruri in a sympathetic light since she was seemingly being harassed by Asahi on a daily basis. But once they started hanging around Asahi, they ended up being hostile toward Ruri. There wasn't

much she could do about it.

Thanks to that, she hadn't been able to make a single genuine friend. And even if she did, it was impossible that they wouldn't somehow find themselves with Asahi, since she was by her side every waking moment. The moment they met her, they transformed from "friend" to "follower" at the drop of a hat.

It was torture to have people hate her because of Asahi, but no matter how hard she racked her brain, no matter what she tried, all attempts at getting away from Asahi, all of them, ended in failure.

She tried prayers with large sums of money at the shrine donation box every year and even tried buying some shady good luck vases, but none of it yet showed any sign of working.

(Dammit, maybe I should try some black magic next...)

As she shut out the annoying clamor around her and sank into a meditative state, something glittering floated past the corner of her vision.

She turned to see several particles sparkling in mid-air. She found herself reaching out, but her hand passed right through them. At the same time, the sound of a metallic *tiiing*, like a bell ringing, filled her ears.

As she looked around in search of the source of the sound, the glimmering particles multiplied even further. And they didn't just grow in number—they seemed to be getting gradually larger in size as well.

These particles gathered neatly around Ruri and the others. Looking down, it appeared as though they were gushing from the ground below them.

"What?"

As the ringing continued, Ruri took a look around her, but she found that neither Asahi nor her four former classmates were paying any attention to it. Just when she decided she must be the only one able to see or hear any of this, the ground underneath them suddenly glowed brightly.

"Huh? What? What's going on?!"

Ruri heard Asahi's panicked and clueless question as she shut her eyes to shield herself from the intense light. Once she did, she was overcome with a

sense of weightlessness and a knot formed in her stomach, almost like she was taking the plunge on a roller coaster. It brought her to her knees.

Once the sense of weightlessness subsided and she opened her eyes, the familiar city buildings and streets with their cars whizzing past were gone, and she found herself sitting in what appeared to be a temple paved with cold stone.

It was spring and things had warmed up considerably, but they were still stuck in the part of the season where you needed long sleeves to fend off the chill. Nevertheless, the place they were in right now, perhaps because of all the stone, was far chillier than where they'd been a few seconds ago.

But it made Ruri wonder if it was truly the *cold* that was making her shiver...

"Ooh! It was a success!"

"The Priestess has come to us!"

It wasn't clear what had just happened or where this even was, but standing in front of Ruri, frozen in wonderment, was an old man dressed in white, priest-like garb and a group of elderly men. They celebrated amongst themselves, ignoring Ruri and the others entirely.

"...Say what?" Ruri's mind had finally started functioning again, but it was quickly thrown into confusion.

She took a look around her to see Asahi and the four former middle school classmates, the same group that had been with her up until a few seconds ago, mouths agape. Just like Ruri, none of them seemed to have a grasp on the situation at hand.

From the crowd of strange men, a young man dressed like a stereotypical movie prince spoke up. "Greetings and welcome, our long-awaited Priestess Princess...?"

The young man spoke with a smile on his face until he looked past Asahi, who was closest to him, and over to Ruri and the other classmates' faces, and his eyes widened in shock.

"Priest, what is the meaning of this?! There are *three* girls here, are there

not?!” yelled the man to the crowd of people dressed in priest robes around him, prompting the old man in the most ornate robes to step forward.

The old man gazed at Ruri and the others, who were still flabbergasted, nodded his head, put his hand on his chin, and said, “It would seem that we’ve accidentally summoned extraneous people, in addition to the Priestess Princess.”

“So which of them *is* the Priestess Princess?”

“The Priestess Princess is said to possess rare coloring and the ability to attract anyone to her, Your Highness”

The young man in the prince outfit being called “Your Highness” took a good look at the faces of Asahi, Ruri, and their female classmate one by one... and finally smiled at Asahi. “Then it must be you. You are the most attractive one here.”

(Wow, talk about rude! He decided it was Asahi after hardly even thinking about it.) Ruri thought bitterly.

The man took to his knee before Asahi and presented his hand like an Arthurian knight pledging his love. Asahi looked at this with flushed cheeks before timidly placing her hand atop his. She was sending passionate looks toward the good-looking gentleman.

Faced with this sight, an idea dawned on Ruri. If Asahi was given her dream man, then maybe Ruri could finally get away from her?! Perhaps entertaining that idiotic thought helped because her once-confused mind was starting to regain its composure.

(We were in the city up until a second ago, so there’s no feasible way we up and moved someplace else. Maybe they abducted us and took us somewhere after knocking us all out? But still, what’s this “Priestess Princess” business all about? Don’t tell me Asahi’s followers are up to something weird again.)

“Asahi’s followers would do something like this” was a nauseating thought that Ruri had more times than she cared to remember.

“Um, excuse me, but where are we? If Asahi is the only one you want, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me go back home.” Ruri addressed one of the nearby

priests, but he simply asked the man presenting his hand to Asahi for instructions in a bewildered manner.

“How should we deal with the others, Your Highness?”

“Right. For the time being, reporting to His Majesty takes precedence. We’ll ask His Majesty how we should handle the others.”

Despite basically saying she wanted to go back home and quickly, she was getting forcibly marched off elsewhere.

They were brought and urged to kneel before a middle-aged man in extravagant clothes, who sat firmly on a lavish throne raised high and exuded an aura that practically shouted that he was the king around here.

Asahi, however, was the only one allowed to keep standing.

“So good of you to come, Priestess Princess. I am the King of the Land of Nadasha. We have been looking forward to your visit in order to grace our land with prosperity.”

The middle-aged man’s statement made no sense, but Asahi replied, flustered, nonetheless.

“Um, thank you... very much... But, um, where might this be? I was in the city a few moments ago...”

“This is the Land of Nadasha. You have been summoned here.”

(Is he seriously saying that fantasy stuff with a straight face?!)

“There is a reason why we have summoned forth you all. Currently, our nation is in the midst of a dilemma. However, our nation has a book of prophecies passed down from the days of old, although it has only been read by kings and priests. It is written that when crisis faces our nation, a Priestess Princess summoned from another realm shall usher prosperity to our lands. And so, in accordance with what is written, the one summoned forth is you, my dear.” He then awkwardly tacked on, “Well, you and a few others, apparently.”

This was enough to make the air-headed Asahi cast looks of doubt toward the King. Same went for Ruri.

“Um, is this some sort of joke? Oh, don’t tell me. Is this a prank? Okay, I get it.

All this ‘summoning’ and magic stuff couldn’t possibly be real, after all...”

“Oh? Does magic not exist in your world, Priestess Princess? Well then, allow me to show you how very real it is,” the King said, turning his gaze toward the old man serving as the Head Priest. He gave a single nod of affirmation before turning his palm up and moving it forward, as if to show Asahi.

Ruri and her former classmates raised their bowed heads and stared, curious as to what would happen. The Head Priest then began to hum to himself as if focusing his energy and, in the next instant, a flame ignited in his wrinkled palm.

Ruri’s breath was taken away in astonishment, and she looked to her side to see her former classmates with similar expressions on their faces.

“Huh? Stage magic?”

“No, I think he means *real* magic...”

“You honestly buy that?”

Ruri shared their opinion. There had to be some trick to all of this.

The Head Priest, sensing the disbelief from Ruri and the others, followed up by creating water in his palm. Asahi timidly reached out to the ball of liquid changing shape and floating in the old man’s hand.

“It really is water.”

“Wait, are you serious?!”

Pleased with Ruri and the others’ shocked reactions, the head priest said, “And I can even do this.” Once he finished his sentence, his body started to float into the air, about a hand’s width off of the ground.

Asahi checked, but there was nothing under the levitating Head Priest’s feet nor were there any wires keeping him suspended. At first they were all suspicious, but with the untampered display being put on before them, they had no other choice but to believe.

With the astonishment over the magic fading, the anger over the fact that they had been pulled into this world because of some fishy prophecy started to well up.

“The Priestess Princess is said to possess rare colors. And with your golden locks and blue eyes, you are undoubtedly the Priestess Princess the prophecy foretold,” said the frail, old man likely to croak at any moment, considered to be the highest ranked among the priests. His words made Ruri’s expression freeze up.

Fortunately, she had her head bowed down once again, so no one noticed the sudden change in Ruri’s demeanor, but she was actually immensely shaken.

Ruri was a natural platinum blonde, meaning she was more truly blonde than her silver-haired mother, but ever since the incident with Asahi dying her hair to mimic Ruri, she had been wearing a wig to hide it.

She was actually instructed to dye it, but since she couldn’t live with herself if she damaged her beautiful hair, for a reason so stupid, she had the wig approved by the school.

Right now, with her brown wig, appearance-hiding glasses, and special make-up techniques she’d learned from her mother, she basically looked like a so-so, middle-of-the-road, dime-a-dozen girl, who would fit the bill for a supporting character in any show’s cast—specifically “Girl A.”

In contrast to Ruri, Asahi had resumed mimicking Ruri’s features ever since she’d started junior college with dyed blonde hair, blue contacts, and flawless make-up.

While there was a good chance Ruri was the one they were really looking for, she’d have to reveal her true appearance to prove it, and she had absolutely no intention of doing that whatsoever.

In fact, it was more convenient if they had things mixed up. Plus, Asahi was speaking with that “prince” they met when they first arrived in a manner far from negative—she looked pleased.

(Alright, let’s press this. After all, she doesn’t seem unhappy with any of this.)

This was Asahi she was dealing with, so there was a possibility she was just forgetting about Ruri even being there, but since Asahi herself didn’t seem to be in any distress, Ruri came to the conclusion that she would be fine. With her

mind made up, she spoke to the King.

“Excuse me, um, she is the only one you need, the Priestess Princess, correct? If you have no need for me, I would appreciate it if you would return me to my world...” she said, waiting for a response while hoping in her heart of hearts that he wouldn’t say there was no way to send her home.

The others, who had been high off of all the mystical fantasy elements revealed to them, seemed to finally grasp the reality of the situation, their faces starting to lose color.

“No way... You mean I won’t be able to see Mommy and Daddy ever again...?” Asahi asked, choking back her tears. Upon seeing this, the King and priests started to panic.

“D-Don’t cry. You have my word that you will be treated as an official guest of our nation and will be given the hospitality you deserve. Ah, yes. I will even arrange it so that you can be together with the ones summoned along with you, to keep you company.”

“Ruri-chan can be with me?” Asahi repeated, looking at Ruri with tear-filled eyes.

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, in that case...”

And that was how Ruri ended up living in the castle without anyone asking her opinion on the matter even once.

(Well, I guess this is fine. It’s not like it would do me any good to yell at him that kidnapping is a crime... And he’s basically saying that they’ll provide us with the essentials.)

Although she felt a little dissatisfied by the ever-present big difference in how she was being treated, she convinced herself that voicing any objection was ultimately pointless.

Chapter 2: The Exile

After being summoned, they were given relatively good treatment due to being friends of the Priestess Princess. Asahi, the proclaimed Priestess Princess, was living a lavish lifestyle just as the King had promised. She had spacious quarters, a personal maid, and a bevy of beautiful dresses and jewels; anything else she wanted, she was given. Ruri was being treated radically differently, but since Ruri was provided with meals every day along with quarters of her own and other bare necessities, she never felt envious of what Asahi had.

After all, the differences in the way the two girls were treated hadn't yet begun in earnest. In a turn of predictable events, Asahi had begun to amass followers even here, in another world.

It was most likely spurred on by her being lauded as the Priestess Princess—the one who would bring prosperity to the land. Ruri had personally held on to the small hope that since they were in a different world, there would be someone with enough mental fortitude not to be taken in by Asahi's wiles, but those hopes were swiftly and ruthlessly shattered.

Faced with this situation, Ruri figured that she should quickly learn this world's common knowledge and culture then get out of the castle and start life on her own. To this end she spent every day learning the country's written language. She had hoped that since the spoken language was the same as her own she would be able to read it as well, but no such luck; this world proved to be a much harsher mistress than that.

Also, unfortunately, even after coming to this world so different from their own, Asahi still stuck to Ruri like glue. Whenever Ruri was studying, Asahi would always come in to disturb her, almost like clockwork.



“Boy, there you go studying again, Ruri-chan~ You don’t have to waste your time studying with us here in this different world, y’know. C’mon, let’s have some fun.”

“I’m doing it because I *need* to.”

(I’m studying exactly because I’m in a different world. You should be hitting the books more yourself. Also, not sure if it’s because he’s been corrupted by you, but for a “prince,” this guy sure doesn’t have any damn patience!)

Behind Asahi was the Prince, glaring at Ruri in detest like Asahi’s followers would in the past, along with the four classmates that were summoned to this world along with her.

It seemed that the Prince had been corrupted as well, and with Asahi coming to see Ruri time and time again, he found Ruri’s presence loathsome. She had earned the ire of a prince who held an immense amount of authority in this land. While she was able to grin and bear the small bits of harassment, she was secretly terrified of it evolving into a bigger incident. Then again, it wasn’t as if she would ever let those fears show on her face.

“Hahah, Princess Priestess and Lady Ruri, you two have quite the *amicable* relationship.”

“Of course, we’ve been best friends since childhood!”

(We have not, dammit.)

Ruri mentally screamed that same interjection for the umpteenth time. It didn’t help that seeing the Prince glare daggers at her while Asahi was oblivious to it all made Ruri want to roll her eyes, but she resisted the impulse.

Eventually, something did happen: Ruri’s worst fear came true.

Upon waking in the morning, she put on her long-sleeved dress and boots which she had been wearing since coming to this world.

They had prepared clothing for them to wear, but the cluttered mess of ornate patterns and designs on the clothes here was too much for Ruri, and she didn’t feel herself wearing them. Though, Asahi and the female classmate gladly

decked themselves out in the stuff.

Just as she had finished tidying herself up and decided to make her way down to the dining hall for breakfast, without any warning, her door burst open and a wave of soldiers came flooding into her room.

“What’s going on?!”

Ruri was frozen in utter shock, but the soldiers paid that no mind as they wrenched her arms behind her and bound her hands with rope, dragging her off to the King’s throne room. She tried to wriggle in resistance against the extremely tight bindings, but they suddenly pushed hard on her head and made her kneel, causing pain to shoot into her tied hands.

“Ow...”

In the room was the King, the Prince, her former classmates, and a boatload of soldiers, but Asahi was nowhere to be seen.

Not only were the soldiers glaring at Ruri like she’d killed all of their parents, but the Prince’s warped smile, along with the expressions on her former classmates’ faces, was filling her with a terrible sense of foreboding.

“We have only been sheltering and providing for you as a favor to the Priestess Princess, yet you attempt to murder her? How dare you, you knave!”

“Huh?! I did no such thin—urk.” Ruri started, objecting as soon as she heard the wild accusations that the Prince was throwing at her, but the soldier standing behind her kicked her, effectively cutting her off.

(Ouch! What the hell is he talking about? Me? Try to kill Asahi?! I would never do something like that!)

“We have a witness,” he proclaimed. As he did, out stepped the female former classmate.

“There is no doubt about it. She was jealous of Asahi-san getting treated better than her and said, ‘I’m going to kill her.’ She asked *me* to help her do the deed!” The girl looked at Ruri for a split second and gave her a twisted smile, which was all Ruri needed for understanding to dawn.

(Aah, now I get it. So she’s working with the Prince to get rid of his perceived

nuisance—i.e. me.) Ruri was awfully clear-headed despite being in such a dangerous situation.

“A crime of this magnitude, plotting to assassinate the Priestess Princess, calls for a punishment of equal magnitude. I suggest we exile her to the Hidden Woods. What say you, Your Majesty?”

“So be it.”

Once the words Hidden Woods left the Prince’s mouth, a chorus of gasps rose from the soldiers, cementing its status as a dangerous place. The thought of that instantly filled Ruri with anxiety.

Ruri started to speak, not necessarily because she thought arguing would be successful but because they were finally allowing her to.

“...Does Asahi know of this? She would never believe that I would threaten her life, and even if it were true, she would probably ask you to spare me,” she said, pain from her bound arms and the spot where the soldier kicked her a minute ago radiating through her body. Her classmates all winced in discomfort, but held their tongues.

That was practically admitting they agreed with what Ruri had said.

The Prince answered her instead. “We wouldn’t dare tarnish the fair Priestess Princess’ ears with news of a friend making an attempt on her life. We will tell her that you couldn’t take being in the castle any longer and ran away.”

“Well and good if she were to buy that, but...”

She would most definitely *not* buy that story.

He most likely just didn’t want Asahi butting in so he could be sure to get Ruri out of the picture, but from Ruri’s perspective, she was trying to tell him that he didn’t have a clue about how Asahi worked. Asahi’s attachment to her was about as persistent and clingy as birdlime. It wasn’t unreasonable to say that if Ruri ran away, then Asahi wouldn’t be too far behind.

(Here I am, in another fine mess because of Asahi. For crying out loud, keep a rein on your followers already!)

Despite always bringing messes to Ruri’s doorstep, Asahi never realized—or

never wanted to realize—how much Ruri had suffered because of her. While Ruri had a host of complaints, she wasn't going to fight any longer. No matter how much she insisted that she was innocent, her adversary here was the Prince of this country. He could forge a crime or assassinate whomever he wanted, so there was no point in trying to argue with him. Thinking of that, well, she didn't know what kind of place this "Hidden Woods" was, but it gave her more hope than being killed right here and now would.

Once they bound her legs in addition to her hands, they chunked her into the back of a carriage like a piece of luggage. While she demanded the bag she had with her when she came to this world, her pleas landed on deaf ears, making her click her tongue in disgust—on the inside.

The back of the carriage had its windows sealed off to prevent escape. She had dreamed about leaving the castle and getting away from Asahi, but she'd never thought that *this* would be the way she'd be doing it.

She fell asleep now and then on the hard wooden carriage floor, so she had no idea how long they had been on the road, but the rattling and rocking from the carriage grew worse and worse.

Shortly thereafter the carriage came to an abrupt halt and she was rather unceremoniously unloaded.

"Hey, you're hurting me!"

"Shut up, wench. If you blame anything for your pain, let it be your own foolishness."

"Come on, we have to move fast."

"Yeah, if we don't get out of here pronto, things aren't going to be pretty for us, either."

The soldiers vacated in the blink of an eye, leaving some unsettling words in their wake.

"At least untie these ropes!" Ruri demanded, her limbs still bound.

The tightly constricting ropes weren't going to loosen just by moving her hands around. She even tried to twist her wrists to slip free, but the hemp rope

simply rubbed against her skin painfully and to no avail. She looked around her to see if she could find anything that could possibly cut her bindings. She thought that a sharp rock might do the job, but there were none within reach.

Just when she figured that she would be forced to crawl on her belly to search, she realized that there was no longer a tight grip around her wrists and ankles. When she looked at her ankles she saw the once tightly wound ropes slip right off. She tested her wrist bindings to find that they too had unraveled.

The knot hadn't come undone. Ruri looked at the cross sections, where the ropes had been cut by something sharp, in bewilderment. The faint notes of a bell ringing sounded, but Ruri didn't notice.

"Well, I'm not sure how this happened, but I'm glad either way," she said, standing up and looking around her while rubbing her now free wrists.

She was in a dense forest, surrounded on all sides by tall trees. Ruri hadn't studied quite enough about this world yet, so she had absolutely no clue where she currently was. Without food or water, her situation was rather dire. It wouldn't be odd if she were to die at any moment. However... she had one goal clear in her mind.

"Mark my words, I'm going to get out of here and get my revenge on all of them. What have I ever done wrong? Asahi befriending me has never been a source of joy in my life, *ever*, so why do I have to pay for it over and over?"

In fact, she was more than glad to be away from her, and if they really wanted the moniker of Asahi's "best friend," then she would have tied it off with a ribbon and presented it on a silver platter for them.

That being said, despite her mind being set on vengeance, she didn't have any semblance of a plan hashed out. Escaping this forest alive was her first priority. Ruri remembered the world map that she had consulted as soon as she came to this world, albeit vaguely.

"There should be a big nation neighboring Nadasha, if I recall correctly..." she trailed off, recalling that there was a nation much larger than Nadasha set to the northeast.

According to what she'd been told, not only was the neighboring nation

heavily populated with beings commonly referred to as “demi-humans,” but the Kingdom of Nadasha held an ingrained dislike toward said demi-humans and the country they inhabited.

“If it’s a nation that the people in *that* nation dislike, then it might be a decent place, all things considered.”

However, she was never going to figure out which direction to head in unless she first determined her current location, and it would be getting dark soon.

In the meantime, she needed to secure the two things necessary for survival—water and shelter. She perked up her ears and concentrated, listening for the sound of a river, but all she heard was the sound of rustling leaves. As she stood there, pondering what she should do next, her ears picked up the sound of a bell ringing from seemingly out of nowhere.

The sound began to fade into the distance, but Ruri was already running toward the direction it had come from, holding out hope that someone would be there when she arrived. She ran so far that she lost track of how much time passed as she desperately chased after the phantom sound. Finally, breathing erratic and unable to move herself any farther, she crumpled to the ground.

As Ruri’s surroundings were encroached on by darkness and made only a little visible thanks to the huge moon up above, the regret of being hasty in her decision-making started to set in.

However, that was when she heard the sound of running water nearby. Once she mustered up all the energy she could to move toward the sound’s source, she stumbled upon a small stream of running water, the sight of which filled her with both joy and relief.

“...I wonder if it’s safe to drink. Unghh, well, it’s better than standing here, withering away.”

Unable to withstand her thirst, she scooped up the water, fully prepared to ruin her stomach, and gulped it down.

In her desperation, Ruri let the fact that the bell ringing had stopped slip her by. With her thirst quenched and a small amount of her composure regained, Ruri’s next order of business was securing a place to sleep. She gathered some

dry-feeling leaves and spread them across the ground to construct a makeshift bed. However, looking at how pitch black it was, some useless fears started to rear their ugly heads.

Since this was a forest, it had to possess wildlife. While she might have stood a chance against a smaller animal, she would have no means of defending herself against an assault from a larger beast. And even if she wanted to start a fire, she had no tools to accomplish that.

“These are the times that I wish I could use magic,” she said, remembering the magic the Priest had shown to convince them of their summoning to this world. What Ruri needed most right now was the magic to produce the same fire and water that he’d shown them. Ruri closed her eyes, pictured fire in her mind, and grunted in fashion similar to the Priest.

“...Yeah right.”

There was no way that she was capable of that feat. They said you needed special training and qualifications in order to learn magic, which is why the Priests who used magic in Nadasha were of high status. If she could so easily do it herself, then Earth would already be filled with sorcerers.

Ruri was ashamed to even humor the thought that she stood even a chance of pulling that off. With that thought heavy in her mind, she opened her eyes only to find—a red hot flame roaring on the ground before her.

“Huh?”

Ruri couldn’t believe her eyes. As she stood there in disbelief, the fire soon started to die, so she rushed to scrape together some dried leaves to keep the flame up. She breathed a sigh of relief now that she’d secured fire for herself, but she wondered over the mystery flame.

“...Nah, it can’t be,” she said to herself, positive that she was incapable of using magic. However, when she held a tree branch in her hand and imagined fire once again, a small candle wick’s worth of fire lit the end of the scrap of wood.

“Hahahah... Oh yeah, I’m definitely dreaming. When I go to sleep and wake up, I’ll be back in my bed,” Ruri said to herself, laying her weary body down in

an attempt to escape from reality. She fell into a deep slumber not long after.

Night turned into day, and while her back and shoulders were killing her, she found herself wide awake. Amazed by her own audacity at being able to fall fast asleep despite her entire situation, she sat up and noticed she was in the same forest as before—a fact that made her despondent as she accepted that everything *wasn't* a dream.



Meanwhile, back in Nadasha, the Prince and former classmates of Ruri all celebrated their successful exile of Ruri from the nation.

“I thank you all for your cooperation.”

“It was my pleasure,” the female classmate replied, bowing with her hand to her chest.

Despite originally being a student in her late teens who didn't know proper royal etiquette, she'd picked up the bare minimum in terms of courtesy and tradition from living in this world. She was told that otherwise she could suffer the consequences, unlike Asahi who was an exception, being Priestess Princess, so she was careful in how she conducted herself.

“I say, that girl was an eyesore, regardless of whether she was a childhood friend or not. Oh well, she is probably resting soundly in the belly of some sort of beast by now. I shall make haste and inform the Priestess Princess that her friend has run away. And I shall help *console* her in her hour of need,” the Prince said, chuckling in an extremely pleased and devious manner as he walked off.

“So hey, did we really do the right thing?” whispered one of the male classmates in a nervous tone.

“What are you freaking out over? You said that girl was a nuisance, too, didn't you?” said the lone girl angrily—she who'd joined in on slandering Ruri as she was being subdued by the soldiers, all the while keeping up appearances as an innocent party.

“That's not what I meant. I'm just saying that *killing* her is going a bit overboard, you know?”

“We didn’t *kill* her. We just *dumped* her in the forest; that’s all.”

“But that’s the same thing as killing her, isn’t it? I mean, you heard what the Prince said, right? That she’s in the belly of a beast or something? We helped make that happen, knowing that she’d go someplace really dangerous, so isn’t that basically the same thing...?”

A short silence descended upon them.

“And why do we even hate her so much anyway?”

Posed with this question, they found themselves speechless. They tried to divine a clear answer from their hazy and vague thoughts, but they weren’t able to pin down anything. They affirmed their actions to get rid of that sense of confusion.

“Quit being so incessant! She was different from us, so we had to get rid of her. This is for Asahi-san’s benefit, too!”

“Yeah... you’re right. She’s... different from us.”

“R-Right.”

Doubts started to ripple among the four, but they weren’t able to develop beyond simple doubts.



It had already been five days since Ruri had been tossed into this forest, and she had somehow managed to survive. Not only had she been able to use fire magic, but Ruri’s grandfather was a former soldier and a survival nut who would bring her to the forest and mountains from a young age. He had been very strict in drilling in all sorts of survival techniques necessary for life out in the wild.

She believed it had helped her gain a greater mental fortitude.

“Disaster can strike at any time, so never slack and always be ready so you can survive!” was what her grandfather loved to say. but she would lash out at him in secret, thinking, “We live in Japan, the most peaceful country around; there’s no way something like that could happen, you survival-obsessed, old coot!” But now, she wanted to sincerely apologize to him for that mental outburst. After all, one never knew what life might throw one’s way.

“...Well, that’s if I can manage to make it back home, of course.”

Although she didn’t honestly believe there was a way she could make it back to her world, the small sliver of hope that the other nation might have some way to make it happen was keeping Ruri afloat.

Just then, she heard the sound of a bell ringing again.

It was the same bell she had been hearing on and off since the first day. Whenever she walked toward the source of that ringing, she would always discover water and food, such as nuts and berries. It seemed as though someone must be watching her, which was a creepy thought at first, but it was thanks to this mysterious benefactor that she avoided starving to death.

Although it was perhaps expecting too much, she also wished they would provide her with a change of clothes and some savory seasonings... Passionately so.

Since she’d heard the bell, she looked around to check for any food lying around, but something was off this time around.

The sound was intense.

It was so intense and felt so close, in fact, that it was almost like it was trying to tell her something. The volume was so loud that she was about ready to scream, “Shut up!” at the top of her lungs, but the sound of grass rustling echoed out from behind her.

Innocently she turned around, to find a mysterious animal that was a cross between a wild boar, a bear, and a scorpion and that stood at about three meters high. Breathing heavily out of its snout, clearly agitated, the animal set its sights on Ruri and let out a bizarre cry, “Boo-hyaaah!” and headed straight for Ruri.

“Eeeeeek! Wait, what? *What?!?*!”

The never-before-seen raging beast came charging at her, but Ruri turned tail, let out a shriek and ran for it at top speed.

She dashed through the trackless paths in the dense, dense forest of green trees.

“Oh God, I’m going to *die*. I’m definitely gonna *dieeee!*”

Focused on running, and not on the branches and tall grasses whipping at her and nicking her body, Ruri eventually timidly checked over her shoulder but, much to her dismay, saw the mystery animal still charging after her.

Tensing her face, she again faced in the direction she was going and sped up her sprint with desperation written all over her face. She cut through and weaved between the trees in an attempt to gain some distance, but the fierce beast trampled over every obstacle that stood in its way, traveling in a straight line toward Ruri and Ruri alone.

“Right now, I’m pretty sure I could set a new world record in track and field! ...Hah, hah. God, you’re persistent. I taste terrible, you know!”

Ruri was running for dear life, but the branches were both hurting her and getting in her way, causing her fatigue to mount.

She was done for...

Just as that thought ran through her mind, she felt a sense of dissonance, as if she were passing through a thin layer of film, which so caught her by surprise that she tumbled to the ground.

She scrambled to her feet in dread and turned around to face her certain demise, but what she found was the fierce beast who was supposed to be charging after her, standing within a stone’s throw of her and checking its surroundings with a completely dumbfounded expression on its face.

And almost as if its persistent chase had never happened, it ignored Ruri and walked off elsewhere.

“...I’m saved... But what was *any* of that?” Ruri said to herself, taking a deep sigh of relief and scanning the area. That was when Ruri’s eyes widened in surprise.

“...A house? But how? That wasn’t here a second ago...”

A huge house had just sprung up in the middle of this completely virgin forest.

It didn’t matter that she’d been running for dear life, there was no possible way that she wouldn’t have noticed a house of this size. Confused, she

approached the house and saw that there was smoke billowing from the chimney.

“Someone’s inside...” She had finally found a real live person since being abandoned in this forest. The memory of being chased by a fierce beast moments ago faded into an afterthought as a smile of relief drew itself across her face.

“Please let this be a nice person!” Ruri’s mind was filled with thoughts of a bath, a change of clothes and a hot meal. She clasped her hands together and prayed that this individual would bless her with all these things as she dragged her exhausted body closer to the house.

“Hey, you, girl. Where did you come from?” said a voice out of nowhere, making Ruri’s shoulders jolt in shock. She turned to the source of the voice. There stood an old woman dripping with blood from head to toe, as if she’d showered in it, holding a kitchen knife in one hand.

“Gyaaaaaah! A killer haaaaag!”

“Who you calling a hag?!”

Faster than she could argue that age wasn’t the concerning factor here, the fatigue from her game of chase with that monster earlier, combined with the shock of witnessing this gruesome sight, caused Ruri’s vision to fade and her to black out.

Chapter 3: The Witch of the Forest

The structure was two stories tall and made of wood. Despite being right in the middle of a forest that no soul dared trespass upon, this wasn't some ramshackle handmade shack in the middle of nowhere. The construction was solid and well-crafted as if built by expert carpenters.

Set on the kitchen table, which was on the first floor, was a hot bowl of soup. Ruri quickly took a spoonful, heart filled with gratitude. Upon her first taste of hot food in days, tears unexpectedly welled up in her eyes.

"I'm so happy~"

"Hey, you either cry or you eat, not both. You want some meat to go with that?"

"Would I ever!"

Ruri was intoxicated by the juicy meat, its flavor exploding across her tastebuds the second she took a bite. As she enjoyed her meal, she was overjoyed that she'd found someone so kind. Their initial encounter had been quite the shocking affair, but, apparently, the reason the old lady was covered in blood wasn't because she had just finished committing murder but because she sensed someone's presence while she was in the middle of gutting a fresh catch out in the shed.

She went to go check what was going on, and stumbled upon Ruri. When the old lady tried to talk to Ruri, she'd passed out right then and there. It was a very confusing situation... However, the old lady had looked after Ruri until she awoke and was now feeding her a hot meal, so Ruri's gratitude was immeasurable.

Ruri had been so busy fainting that she hadn't gotten a good look at the lady's face. Now that she did, she realized how disarmingly normal looking of an old lady she was. That wasn't to say that she didn't come off as a tad ill-tempered, but considering she was providing a meal to a completely unexpected stranger,

dropped into her lap out of the blue, she couldn't be so bad.

The thought crossed her mind that she might be one of those fairy tale witches, who pretend to be friendly until they eat you, but the meal in front of her was far more important right now! But still, she checked on the location of the fireplace out of the corner of her eye...

"Seems you've been through hell. I've never had any love for Nadasha, but now my impression of them is even worse. I dunno what their book of prophecy or whatever says, but they're fools for abducting you from your own world."

Ruri's hands stopped in the middle of eating, and she looked at the old woman in surprise. "Excuse me for asking, but how do you know that? I haven't mentioned anything about it."

Ruri hadn't said anything about where she'd come from, yet the old lady was speaking as if she knew the entire situation in detail. The old lady smiled and turned her sights to the empty ceiling as if to imply something. Ruri looked at the ceiling herself in a similar fashion, but she found nothing there. She cocked her head in confusion.

"*They* told me the whole story." She said "they," but there was no one... on the ceiling—in fact, there was no one else in the room besides Ruri and the old lady. This answer only raised more questions. "From how you're acting, it seems you can't see them at all. ...Ah, right. Did you hear any odd sounds on your way here?"

"Sounds? ...Oh, I did hear bells ringing sometimes, but I just figured that was the hunger playing tricks on me. ...But, whenever I would follow it, there was always food and water waiting for me," she said. The same bell sound she'd heard in the forest rang out once more, as if "they" were confirming their attendance.

"That's the voice of the spirits, and there are a bunch of them in this room right now."

Ruri took one more look around the room, but she still saw neither hide nor hair of any "spirits."

"From what I can see, you seem to possess a considerable amount of mana.

Maybe the reason you can't see them is that you have yet to master it. It doesn't matter how powerful the tool you have may be, it's useless unless you know how to operate it."

So there *was* something there, she just couldn't see it. It was like trying to watch a television that wasn't turned on. *Which means, all I would have to do is flip the power switch, huh?* Ruri thought to herself. She began creating a mental image like when she lit the fire, concentrating, focusing the idea of power into her eyes.

Then, she felt a sensation come over her—it was like a fog had lifted from her vision. The next moment, she could clearly see bewinged people with very young faces, who were so tiny they could fit in the palm of her hand, in the room. And it wasn't just one or two of them either. Some floated near the ceiling, some sat atop the table, but there were dozens of tiny people—men and women, dressed in all sorts of different outfits.

"Eeek!" Ruri exclaimed, the shock making her throw herself back in her chair with such force that the chair tipped over and she tumbled to the floor. The spirits all gathered around her in concern.

"Are you okay?"

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine... Wait, huh? I can understand what you're saying."

"Well, I'll be. So you can see them already, eh? Guess you're just a really quick learner... You're emitting a wavelength of mana that spirits are fond of. The reason you can hear their voices is because you're now able to recognize the spirits' presences."

"Wavelength?"

"Before I explain that, you explain who this 'Asahi' girl is. These little ones were being too vague and abstract, so I don't have the full story."

Despite being directly asked to do so, giving a detailed account of her troubles to a person she'd literally just met was making Ruri feel awkward. She couldn't say for certain whether this person was on her side. She would be fine if she were kicked out for being a nuisance after talking, but if she were to send her

back to Nadasha she would be dead meat.

“I’m sorry, but I’m a little wary of telling my private business to a suspicious person I’ve only just met...” Ruri said, prompting the old woman to pick up the piece of meat that Ruri had only taken a single bite of.

“Oh? Then you don’t need the *food* that this *suspicious person* you’ve only just met cooked, I take it.”

“Woah! No, I do! I really do! I’ll tell you anything!”

Implementing starvation tactics was a lowdown yet shrewd move. In her current state, Ruri couldn’t bear taking in the delicious aroma of the meal set before her without being able to take in the meal itself.

As she ate the chop of meat now returned to her, she detailed her account of what had happened after she was summoned to this world. Over the course of the telling, her passion started to gradually swell, and almost as if she were never reluctant to speak in the first place, she went into great detail—especially when it came to Asahi. She complained her heart out, breaking out into tears, with all the resentment she’d held onto ever since she was a child. She almost sounded like a drunk dad ranting and sobbing about his family and society.

After she’d finished her entire story, Ruri’s face looked absolutely miserable, but her spirit felt refreshed. Ruri had been surrounded by Asahi’s followers for much of her life. Her parents were not included in those ranks, but they had been overseas for nearly a year, so she didn’t have any real place to vent her frustrations. Nevertheless, making someone listen to all that was inconsiderate.

“You’ve gone through hell, haven’t you, child?”

“Do you mean you understand?! Everyone is always on Asahi’s side and are really hostile toward me, and when I try to get away from her, she just sticks to me like a limpet! She’d probably even follow me after I get married; you have no idea how much I’ve feared that!” Ruri said, still willing to vent more, but the old lady’d had her fill and stopped her there.

“Yes, yes. I understand. You’ve told me enough. But I can certainly see where this ‘Asahi’ girl is coming from.”

“In what way?”

“You have an extremely comforting wavelength.”

“You mentioned this ‘wavelength’ earlier.”

“That I did. Anyone who retains mana in them possesses a wavelength. Simply put, it’s the quality of your mana. In this world, that wavelength is far more important than how much mana you possess. This sort of magic, the one to employ the help of spirits in exchange for mana, is commonly used, but the type of spirit you can employ depends on whether they’re compatible with your wavelength. If they like your wavelength, then they’ll work to aid you. If not, they won’t even come near you. *You* have a host of spirits of all types around you right now. That means you have a wavelength of incredible quality which many different spirits are fond of.”

“So, basically, Asahi doesn’t leave me alone because she likes my wavelength?”

“Rarely do you ever see this many types of spirits scrambling to enlist their services. And I assume that this Asahi girl has felt extremely comfortable by your side as well.”

Ruri now understood the reason behind Asahi’s stalker-grade persistence, but that didn’t make her any less of a thorn in her side. If it was an innate quality, then that meant that you couldn’t change it through force of will. No matter what she did, Asahi would never leave her alone. After all, it didn’t matter how negatively Ruri behaved toward her. Ruri’s personality and attitude wasn’t what Asahi was attracted to, it was her mana. These depressing thoughts were written plainly on her face, her expression turning bitter.

“Oh, but, wait. Since these are wavelengths of mana, Asahi shouldn’t be able to sense them unless she has mana herself, right?” Ruri asked, voicing the suspicion that had suddenly popped into her mind.

The old lady’s expression took a stern turn. “This is just my hunch, but don’t you think this girl has been using magic?”

“Magic? ...No, not at all. In fact, in the world we come from, magic only exists in fiction.” Also, when they were shown magic after coming to this world, Asahi was the most surprised out of any of them. Ruri knew Asahi well, albeit unwillingly, so from her perspective, it was hard to think she was putting up an

act.

“You say that, but the way people react around Asahi sounds very similar. Similar to a magic known as ‘Bewitch,’ that is.”

“Bewitch...?”

“It’s a magic that manipulates people by making them unconditionally attracted to you.”

“Then why am I not affected?”

“You not only have mana of fine quality, but of ample supply. It doesn’t work on people with mana greater than the caster.”

Bewitching magic... Ruri was shocked to hear of such a thing existing, but, now that she was entertaining the possibility, it would explain the actions of the many people who acted like Asahi’s slaves, blindly following her in everything. Nevertheless, Ruri couldn’t believe that it was something Asahi was doing knowingly. She had done so many different things in order to give Asahi the slip, and seeing as how Asahi never stopped involving herself in Ruri’s life, even when it caused everyone to treat Ruri with disdain, Ruri couldn’t deny the thought that Asahi might have been secretly overjoyed at her mistreatment all this time. She tried trailing her to unmask her true motives, hired a detective and even ran a background check on her, but all she found out was that Asahi was a simple—ton... *a ton* of happy-go-lucky optimism bundled into one person.

Having gotten her own way in everything since childhood, the consideration for others that most people learn through social interaction—the part of you that gauges the feelings of others—was completely missing from Asahi. Be that as it may, Ruri didn’t get the impression that she was trying to hurt people maliciously. Though there were many cases of Asahi’s inability to take hints causing pain for others, but, well... kids would be kids; they act out of instinct.

“I can’t imagine Asahi controlling them on purpose.”

“...I see. Coming from you, who’s spent so much time with her, that might very well be true. It could be that she’s been using magic *unconsciously*.”

“Is that possible? If she has that kind of power, that must mean beyond a

shadow of doubt that Asahi is the Priestess Princess, right?”

“Who knows. I sure don’t. But in terms of power, with all these spirits favoring you, I’d say you’re far more powerful than her and her Bewitch magic. Plus, in terms of possessing ‘rare colors,’ you also fit the bill.”

Ruri placed her hand on her head and realized that she had lost her brown wig somewhere along the way. “If they were to find out that Asahi’s hair and eye color are fake, then they would probably come chasing after me...”

“Not exactly. While your platinum hair and deep blue eyes are rare, having the same hair and eye color is also considered rare here. You can’t definitely say that she’s not the real thing.”

“I see. That goes for the classmate girl as well, then.”

“That it does. Still, no one will know for sure until they bring the prosperity foretold.”

Ruri racked her brain as to what she was going to do if they came chasing after her. The old woman pulled a piece of paper from a drawer and started to write something down on it. Once she finished, she walked over to a square box filled with water and submerged the paper, which then quickly disappeared without a trace as if dissolving into the water.

“What is that, if you don’t mind?”

“I’m sending a letter with this. If you write a letter and dissolve it in this box, the letter gets delivered to the recipient’s box.”

“Oh wow. That’s neat.” She didn’t know how the infrastructure of that device worked, but it certainly served as a reminder that this was not Earth.

“Who did you send it to?”

“To my grandson, who serves in the Dragon King’s castle. I’m requesting that he investigate this Asahi girl and the contents of that book of prophecies. If she’s doing it on purpose, then Nadasha is being manipulated, which could cause harm to the Nation of the Dragon King as well. If she’s doing it unconsciously, she will need to be taught how to control her mana to avoid disaster.”

The mention of the “Nation of the Dragon King” made all thoughts of Asahi fly out the window. “Wait, you’re from the *other* country, Granny?!”

“Who are you callin’ ‘Granny’?!”

“Then what name should I call you? By the way, my name is Ruri.”

The old woman hesitated for a little and then murmured, barely above a whisper, “...Chelsie.”

“...Pft,” Ruri snorted. She tried desperately to hold it in but couldn’t contain her laughter. This ill-tempered witch-like old lady straight out of the fairy tales was named “Chelsie.” It was a name that didn’t match her face *at all*. “Aww, that’s so *cute*! Ahahaha!”



“And *that’s* why I didn’t want to tell you. Dammit, quit your laughing or you’re not getting another bite to eat out of me!”

“Eep! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I, for one, think it is an adorable name that suits you perfectly... Pft, hee hee...”

“If that’s the line you’re gonna feed me, *at least* contain your laughing fit first! Your shoulders and voice are still shaking, for crying out loud!”

Ruri waited for her laughter to subside and asked about the “Nation of the Dragon King” that Chelsie had mentioned.

“The Nation of the Dragon King is the country neighboring Nadasha, and it’s my birthplace. This forest lies right in the middle. As its name would suggest, it’s a country ruled by the Dragon King. One of the largest countries on the continent, in fact.”

“The Dragon King?”

“The ruler of the dragonkin. Do you know of the dragonkin?”

Ruri shook her head in response.

“It’s a race that possesses two forms—one dragon and one human. There are plenty of other races—catkin, dogkin—though there are some within those races who only have one form, like humans. However, unlike humans, they have beastly elements to their appearances. They are sometimes called ‘beast-men,’ but the more polite term is ‘demi-humans.’ There are many humans who discriminate against demi-humans, and Nadasha is home to many of them. In contrast, in the Nation of the Dragon King, under the current Dragon King’s rule, humans and demi-humans live free of discrimination.”

“Oh wow...” If Ruri retained anything from that it was that the Nation of the Dragon King seemed to be a much more scrupulous place than Nadasha. However, what Ruri really wanted to ask wasn’t about dragonkin or demi-humans—it was about a way back home. “So do you think someone from there would know a way for me to get back to my world?!” Ruri asked, gulping in anticipation as she awaited Chelsie’s response. If there were that many races around, then someone—*anyone*—had to have an answer.

Chelsie then reluctantly opened her mouth, clearly knowing she was about to crush Ruri's hopes. "Unfortunately, there is no way for you to return home."

"Maybe *you* just don't know and if I go to the Nation of the Dragon King, there will be someone who does and..." Ruri desperately tried to make an argument for her case, but Chelsie shook her head.

"While not quite the same as you, since you were brought here against your will, people do occasionally end up here from your world. But not a single one of them has ever returned home."

"...No way."

"Long ago, there was a drop-in who had held on to memories of their own world. She said this: 'Dropping in is the easy part, but in order to climb out, you need to cast aside your form.'"

"What is that supposed to mean...?"

"This will be hard to hear, but unless you die in this world, you won't return to that world."

Ruri was dumbfounded. Her thoughts were frozen, as if her mind had stopped working altogether. She had survived in the forest this whole time with the slight hope that she might be able to return home. Now that hope was shattered and everything looked bleak. What was she supposed to do going forward? How was she supposed to live in this crazy alternate world without a single acquaintance to rely on...? As she descended into despair, what came slowly welling up to the surface wasn't tears—it was rage.

(I get abducted into this alternate world, arrested on false charges, chased by a giant wild animal in the middle of this forest and have to fight tooth and nail for survival. Why the hell is all this happening to me?!)

The root of all her problems was obvious. It was the girl who thought the world revolved around her, oblivious to the trouble she caused Ruri; the Prince and classmates who threw her out into this unfamiliar world without anything but the clothes on her back; and the King and Priests who abducted her in the first place.

(I simply will not take this lying down! If I can't go back home, then I at least

want to relieve all this stress and get compensated for my trouble!) Once she came to this conclusion, Ruri acted decisively. She kneeled in front of Chelsie and bowed her head.

“I realize that I am putting you out, but cleaning, laundry, cooking—I will do anything! So please, would you let me stay here and teach me the magic and rules of this world?”

Even if revenge was her only goal, learning the rules of this world would be essential, and seeing as how she had natural magical make-up good enough to attract spirits, she would be crazy not to capitalize on that.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Chelsie replied, her eyes widening for a moment, but she agreed in a matter of seconds.

It caught Ruri by surprise. “Huh? Are you sure it would be okay? I know me saying this is odd, but I think you should be a little bit more wary about who you let into your home...”

“I’ve been in this big house all by myself for long enough. Having a housemate would liven things up around here. Besides, I’m not inclined to be wary of someone who’s charmed all these spirits like you have. If I kick you out, then these little ones will probably stop lending me their powers.”

There were indeed a ton of spirits there. Ruri felt extremely grateful that out of all the people she could have run into, she ran into Chelsie.

“Chelsie-san, you are such a good person. Despite your ill-tempered old lady face...”

“On second thought, out you go.”

And so, Ruri began living with the witch and spirits she met in the forest.

Chapter 4: Power of the Spirits

Ruri's new life in the forest started with the sunrise. She rushed out of the house bright and early, taking in a deep breath of the forest's clean early morning air.

"Aah, how refreshing!"

"Refreshing!"

"'Freshing!"

The spirits around Ruri stretched in a similar fashion, mimicking her movements. It had been a few days since she'd started living at Chelsie's house. Although she was still sad about there being no way back to her world, she was fully enjoying her new lease on life devoid of Asahi's annoyances.

She was staying in one of the many rooms in this huge house, which seemed too big for just one person to live in. Her days were now full of surprises. At first, Ruri was ready and raring to learn magic for both her everyday life and for her revenge, but the process that Chelsie taught her was so severely underwhelming that it left her dumbstruck and asking, "That's it?"

She taught her that the most common method for enlisting a spirit's powers was to basically think of what you want to do in your head and wish for the spirit to carry it out. It was anticlimactically simple, but just having the right wavelength or amount of mana didn't necessarily mean that whatever popped into your head would manifest into magic.

For example, if you wanted to create water for laundry, unless you were compatible with a water spirit, the water spirit wouldn't lend you their power. Alternatively, if you had a small reserve of mana, then the amount of water you'd produce would be small as well. Even if your mana reserves were somewhat limited, the spirit could compensate for that if your wavelength was compatible, so it was no exaggeration to say that a lot rode on how much the spirits favored your wavelength.

Ruri possessed a wavelength spirits loved, as verified by Chelsie, and if she asked the spirits to do something they would all scramble to provide their services. Chelsie reprimanded Ruri for the strength of her power and instructed her to limit the amount of mana she emitted in the future. Chelsie also told her that she would just have to get used to this, and she spent her days manifesting harmless magic. She mainly used it on the one thing indispensable in everyday life and bound to cause minimal harm even if she were to botch it—water. Ever since the time she tried to light the oven and let loose a giant stream of fire that almost burned the house down, Chelsie had given her strict orders not to use fire magic until her control was much better.

At first, Ruri continued to use her magic without an understanding of mana, but slowly she began to feel the sensation of something exiting her body each time. It was noticeable enough to help Ruri learn how mana functioned, and knowing what it was meant that she could work on keeping it in check. So in spite of the occasional failure here and there, she eventually learned how to control it. Once she did, her everyday life dramatically changed.

In this world—not just within the confines of the forest—facilities like electricity, sewage and gas didn't exist the way they did in Ruri's world. All laundry was washed by hand, food was cooked on hearth-like stoves, and lighting was provided by lanterns—these standards of living resembled Europe centuries ago. Accustomed to the conveniences of her world, it would be totally understandable if Ruri found life without them painful—but she didn't, for one big reason: magic.

Ruri had offered to do the cleaning, the laundry, and the cooking in exchange for lodging at Chelsie's house. For cleaning, she would use wind to gather dust and debris into a small pile and dispose of it with fire, magic she was free to use now that her studies had progressed. For laundry, there was a spell known as "Purification," which was a handy piece of magic that allowed water to wash away stains without getting the clothes wet, forgoing any post-wash drying like you would have with any normal method of cleaning. This magic could be used on both clothes and bodies. So once Ruri learned it she immediately wished she'd had it during her time in the woods, when she was positively filthy from

sweat and grime every waking moment.

As such, Ruri was extremely grateful for the existence of magic and started to believe it was even more handy than anything that existed in her own world. Humans were the race with the least amount of mana, it wasn't at all uncommon for a human not to have any. Given that, relying on magic in everyday life wasn't possible for everyone, and many people's cleaning and laundry had to be done by hand.

But for Ruri, even without her active, conscious magic, the spirits would bring loads of berries and fruits that grew in the forest to please her, so stocking up on food was a breeze. This behavior on the part of the spirits was baffling to Chelsie.

That brings us to the present with Ruri, who was up bright and early to do one thing—take a bath! Regardless of being told that Purification magic rendered bathing unnecessary, the Japanese side of her wanted to soak in a bathtub and relax.

Purification was a relatively simple form of magic, which mostly anyone could use as long as they had at least a little mana or some aptitude for water, so it was apparently not customary in the Dragon King's Nation to soak in bathtubs. (Those who couldn't use Purification would use their tubs to wipe or wash off, but never soak.) However, after singing the praises of bathing to Chelsie non-stop for days, she was allowed to build a bathhouse in the backyard—she either convinced Chelsie with her passion or the woman was trying to get her to shut up.

“Alrighty, time to get building!”

“Build what?”

“A bathhouse, she said.”

“What's a bathhouse?”

“Beats me.”

She envisioned a small log house with a bathtub in as much detail as she could muster. As soon as she had, several twigs split through the soil and sprung forth. The twigs proceeded to grow as if they had a mind of their own,

gradually taking form until they produced the log house that Ruri had imagined.

Seeing the house exactly as she had envisioned it, she pumped her fist in victory. “Hooray! There’s nothing magic can’t do! All of you are really amazing!”

“Yay, I got complimented!”

“Yeah, hear that? I’m amazing!”

The spirits zipped around in the air, elated from all the praise, the sight of which was both cute and comforting. But Ruri wasted no time opening the wooden door and entering the bathhouse. There was a dressing room in the foyer and a door in the back leading to a classy and spacious bathing area. It was reminiscent of a personal open-air bath you might see in a high-class Japanese inn.

All she needed to do now was fill it with hot water and it would be perfect—she could use it any time she wanted. Containing her excitement at this point was simply impossible.

“Mm~! First bath in ages, here I come!” Ruri said, quickly using magic to fill the bath with hot water, then undressing in the changing room and hopping in. She proceeded to melt in pleasure as she reunited with the familiar warmth of the bathwater. Perhaps attracted by seeing Ruri’s elation, the spirits joined her in the piping hot water.

“This is absolute heaven...”



As Ruri was enjoying her early morning bath, Chelsie was inside the house, reading the letter she’d received from her grandson, Joshua, who served as an intelligence operative in the Nation of the Dragon King. Only a few days had passed since discussing the Nadasha situation, but he’d already sent back a report. He was quite a capable grandson indeed. The report detailed Nadasha’s current state vis-a-vis the Priestess Princess and the prophecy. As Ruri had explained, the handful of people close to Asahi showed an abnormal amount of attachment and adoration, but there were no real issues present by Joshua’s account.

Apparently, there were some signs that she had been using Bewitch magic. It

wasn't clear if it was on purpose or not, but the mana that this "Asahi" herself possessed wasn't enough to be perceived as a threat. She did seem to have a lot of mana for a human, but in order to keep someone bewitched, they had to stay near Asahi for a long time, otherwise it wouldn't work. Even if it did, the bewitchment would disappear if the victim spent much time away from her.

However, according to Ruri's account, if you associated with Asahi at all, you practically became her slave. Chelsie thought that this difference in accounts came from the different worlds' tolerances toward magic—in this world, you were introduced to magic from the moment you were born; whereas, in the other world, magic as she knew it didn't even exist. In Ruri's world, there was no immunity toward magic, so the effects probably worked far *too* well. Regardless of where they were being bewitched, it appeared that the prophecy correlated to the people of Nadasha essentially worshiping Asahi. A passage from the prophecy stated, "The Priestess Princess who descends from another world shall bring great prosperity to the land, but should one do something not to the Priestess Princess' liking, it shall lead the land to decay." That was probably why everyone—not just the bewitched Prince—took such drastic measures against Ruri when they had suspicions of her inflicting harm upon Asahi. It had spelled misfortune for Ruri, but delight for Chelsie.

Nadasha was a nation that had always been cruel and compassionless toward demi-humans. They were envious of them for having a territory that spanned far wider than their own human territory and had waged war on them countless times. Many demi-humans were born with varied incredible skills and abilities. Given a choice between a nation that allowed individuals with those abilities to flourish and a nation that prohibited those abilities and proclaimed humans superior, it was obvious which of these would prosper. Nadasha was a nation living in willful ignorance for the sake of hate. The thought of what would happen if they *did* recruit Ruri sent shivers down Chelsie's spine.

In the Nation of the Dragon King, the strongest dragonkin—known to be the strongest race in this world—was crowned king. Then there was Ruri. She was human, the race with the least amount of mana among many, but her mana rivaled that of the Dragon King himself and she was adored by a host of spirits. While those favored by spirits appeared from time to time, a spirit acting on

their own to help someone—such as aiding someone stranded in the woods or bringing them food—was exceedingly rare. Spirits governed everything, and although they appeared adorable, they could easily lay waste to a country if provoked.

In addition, Chelsie sensed that those spirits had a deep affection for Ruri, almost as a mother would for her children. If something were to happen to Ruri, those spirits would no doubt come seeking retribution. If Ruri had been incorporated into that other nation, whose agenda included the elimination of demi-humans, and implanted with their anti-demi-human ideas... it could have meant full-blown human on demi-human genocide. And the most terrifying thing of all—Ruri herself was oblivious to this possibility.

The next sentence she read affirmed her fears.

“Yeah, letting this matter sit won’t do,” Chelsie said, standing up and heading toward Ruri.



“*Haaah*, yup, Japanese people need their baths. Oh, Chelsie-san. Care for a dip, Chelsie-san? I promise you it feels great.”

As Ruri was coming out of her long-awaited bath, Chelsie came up to her, looking oddly serious. “Ruri, can you spare a minute?”

“Huh? Yes, what is it?” Ruri asked, slightly on guard, worried she’d done something to upset her.

“Ruri, I know you have some history with Nadasha, but do you resent them?”

“Of course I do! Revenge is my number one goal!” Ruri replied promptly, emphatically, and without hesitation. Not only did they accuse her of a crime she didn’t commit, they dumped her in a forest crawling with dangerous wild animals. Fortunately, she made it out in one piece thanks to the help of the spirits, but one wrong step and she could have ended up dead meat. Ruri didn’t know the meaning of the phrase “taking things lying down.” She was going to have her revenge, no matter what.

That was when Chelsie’s voice started to sound a little strained. “By ‘revenge,’ what do you mean? What do you intend to do?”

“Why, I’ll make them cry! I’ll make them grovel! Asahi, the main thorn in my side this whole time; the King and the Priest who abducted me; the Prince and those classmates who pinned a fake crime on me; the soldiers who kicked me? I’m going to line them all up and punch the daylights out of them!”

“And that’s it?”

“I guess that’s taking it too easy, isn’t it? Good point. I *was* fighting for my life, after all. I should probably throw in a few roundhouse and axe kicks while I’m at it, shouldn’t I? Then, I’ll give them the bald samurai cut, shaving everything off the top, and make them parade around town, too.”

The elderly King and Head Priest could handle that, but it would probably inflict some major mental damage on the much younger Prince and the soldiers. No, actually, those elderly men being forced to part with the few remaining hairs they still had on their heads might hurt *a lot*.

“Aah... I see...” Chelsie said, giving Ruri a curious look but appearing somewhat relieved. Why she looked relieved, however, was a mystery. “Now I know that you’re harmless.”

“Harmless? Even though I’m planning all these nasty things?”

“You could make them suffer with torture, destroy the nation, make an example of the monarchy—there are so many ways you could enact revenge, but those weren’t even on your list, were they?”

“Huh...? I wouldn’t go that far...” Ruri said, her face tensing up upon hearing these revenge methods beyond the scope of her own imagination.

It was indeed safe to say that, compared to Chelsie’s forms of revenge, Ruri’s revenge was relatively harmless.

“In that case, I have a request for you.”

“What would that be?”

“Thing is, magic has suddenly stopped working in Nadasha. Any call for a spirit goes completely unanswered.”

“Why is that?”

The answer to Ruri’s question came from the very spirits floating around her.

“Those guys picked on you, Ruri.”

“This is what they deserve!”

“You said you wanted revenge, so this is what they get, Ruri.”

“We hate anyone who’s mean to you, Ruri!”

The spirits fired off one reason after another, their tone light but their words filled with anger.

“Magic stopped working there on the day you were dumped in the forest, so I didn’t want to immediately assume, but it seems I was right. *You* are the reason, Ruri.”

“But they made Ruri mad!”

“She said she wanted to take revenge!”

“Because I said that?”

“Uh-huh.”

The spirits all happily nodded their heads as if wanting praise for their actions, but a cold sweat running down Ruri’s brow was all they received instead.

“In other words, it’s my fault the spirits are boycotting...”

“Not being able to use magic in this world is a life-and-death situation. The power of spirits is necessary for cooking, hygiene—all facets of daily life, really. Granted, humans hold the least amount of mana. Only a handful of people, such as the priests, can use legitimate magic, but now that the spirits have stopped helping them Nadasha has apparently fallen into great turmoil. If your revenge doesn’t entail laying waste to Nadasha as a whole, then could you put a stop to this?”

Ruri did want revenge, but throwing the nation into turmoil or laying waste to it wasn’t part of her plan. She wanted revenge on the King, Priests, and soldiers, not the people who lived there. And even if that wasn’t the case, Ruri could never find it in herself to carry out an outrageous agenda like destroying a whole country anyway. Although a place going into turmoil just because they couldn’t use magic was hard for Ruri to imagine, considering she was raised in a world without magic to begin with, Chelsie’s tone was serious, and Ruri spoke

to the spirits to convince them to stop.

She was met, however, with a chorus of complaints.

"Aww, but how come? How come?"

"Don't you want to get your revenge?"

"Well, yes, I do, but... that's an issue I have to tackle, I want to sock it to them myself. Please, guys, just let me handle this."

"So are we... getting in the way...?"

"Urk..." Ruri winced, faced with a group of adorable spirits on the verge of tears. "Not at all! I am so grateful to have you all around."

"Really?"

"Yup, for sure. I'll have you guys help once the time is right. But for now, don't do anything without my say-so. Okay?"

"Okay, got it!"

Despite Chelsie throwing a rather pained look her way, with the frowns of the spirits turned upside down, Ruri felt a sense of relief. Chelsie simply heaved an unenthusiastic sigh and said, "Ruri, I will give you one piece of advice. As you've learned from this incident, if anything happens to you, the spirits will take swift action. There might be those who wish to use that power in the future. I'll provide you with all the knowledge that I have. So you just make sure you can differentiate between right and wrong, so that no one ends up manipulating you."

"...Are you sure you should be telling me that?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you were the one to take me in when I was wandering the forest and had nowhere to go. I feel like I can never repay your kindness. I'm pretty much like a baby who doesn't have a clue on how this world works, so you could implant any kind of thoughts or concepts of good or evil that suit you right now. And since you're the person who saved my life, I would be inclined to believe anything you said."

Ruri was implicitly asking why Chelsie wasn't taking her chance to manipulate her, to which Chelsie smiled wryly in reply. "Yes, that probably would be quite a simple task, but it would be extremely dangerous. You are smart enough to realize there's the threat of someone brainwashing you. I'm also sure that now that you know of the danger of ordering the spirits to act, you'll make sure that they don't go out of control. But there are some fools who would know of these dangers and think only of how they could profit from them. That's why you must never be swayed by the unsubstantiated opinions of another. That is the one thing you must always remember, if nothing else."

"I will keep that in mind, but if the spirits are that powerful, then if I were to take over the world using the spirits, not someone else—what would you do?"

"I will pray that never comes to pass. But you seem to be timid at heart, so you probably wouldn't carry out such a heinous act. A few acts of mischief, on the other hand, are no problem."

"Okay, I won't deny that I *am* a little timid, but are these spirits really as dangerous as you make them out to be?" asked Ruri. It was hard to believe that such cute beings could be that deadly. Their appearance and speech were so childlike they didn't seem dangerous to her at all. Plus, she understood that magic was very convenient, but she also thought that people should be able to go about their lives even if they fell out of favor with the spirits and couldn't use magic.

"Alright, alright. I'll explain everything to you. ...But, first, it's pretty noisy out here, don't you think?" Chelsie said, suddenly looking in the opposite direction and furrowing her brow.

Ruri looked too, perplexed. "But no one is making any noise?" Ruri replied. None of the spirits around her made a peep.

"Not in here. I meant outside the barrier."

"Barrier?"

"This house is surrounded by a magical barrier that makes it invisible and keeps others from coming in. You didn't feel it when you came in here?"

Her incredulity made Ruri recall the feeling of her body passing through a

layer of film of some kind, right before she saw the house. “Now that you mention it, I do remember having the sense that my body was passing through something when I came here...”

“Yes, normally you would have been rejected by the barrier and unable to enter. This kind of magic doesn’t work on people with magic stronger than the user’s own. So I was very surprised to see you! Plus, on top of you looking filthy, you passed out as soon as you saw me.”

“...Right, sorry for all the trouble.”

Ruri followed Chelsie as she went to check on the barrier. She hadn’t noticed it when she first came here, but now that she understood magic, Ruri was also able to understand that there was an invisible barrier from sensing the magic in the air. Ruri looked through it with great interest until she eventually found the source of the ruckus.

“...Ah! It’s that wild beast! And it’s... wearing my wig.”

The same gigantic beast with the physique of a bear, face of a boar, and tail of a scorpion, which had chased Ruri to Chelsie’s house, was repeatedly charging into the barrier. And atop its head sat the brown wig that Ruri had lost as she made her getaway. It seemed it had gone out of its way to pick it up...

“No way, that thing wanted to eat me... Chelsie-san, we have to run!” She started tugging on Chelsie’s clothes to run away, but Chelsie didn’t budge.

“Hold it. No one can pass through the barrier unless their mana is stronger than mine. That magic beast won’t be able to, so calm down.”

“Magic beast?”

“It’s what we call animals who have mana, unlike regular animals. ...Still, it’s odd. I’ve never seen one behave like this before,” Chelsie commented, perplexed.

The spirits then answered, one after another.

“It just picked up Ruri’s hair.”

“It’s not here to attack me?”

“No, no. It said you dropped it, so it picked it up to return to you.”

“It wouldn’t attack you anyway. It’s been protecting you in the forest this whole time.”

According to the spirits’ explanation, the reason why Ruri had been able to survive for days in this forest teeming with animals and magic beasts was because this particular magic beast had been secretly following her and protecting her from other threats the entire time.

It remained hidden as to not frighten Ruri, but in the end it was unable to contain itself and showed up in front of Ruri anyway. Just as it thought, its presence frightened her into running away, causing the beast to instinctively start chasing her as a result. The reason it seemed so frenzied wasn’t because it had found prey but because it was so happy that it had emotionally overloaded.

When it came back to its senses after losing sight of Ruri, it picked up the wig she dropped and waited for her to come out so it could apologize, but since waiting clearly wasn’t doing the trick, it had to resort to stronger measures.

This creature was as stalwart as the most loyal of dogs.

“Since it has mana, it was attracted to Ruri’s wavelength just like the spirits, eh?”

“Hey, can you guys speak with that magic beast?” Ruri asked to confirm, seeing that the spirits seemed to understand what the beast was saying despite it only speaking in incoherent *bmoos*.

“Yup, sure can.”

“If it can understand the spirits and vice versa, then you all should have filled it in...” said Chelsie. It would have saved the beast days of waiting had they just done that.

The spirits quickly and nonchalantly replied, *“Oops, we forgot!”*

The magic beast seemed to slump its shoulders in response. Once Ruri exited the barrier and approached it with caution, it slowly presented its wig-capped head to her, so Ruri ever so carefully took the wig back.

“T-Thank you...” Ruri said, and the beast loudly *bmooo*’ed back at her, causing her to jolt in surprise.

“It says it wants you to pet it, Ruri.”

“Wha?! Really?”

Approaching the unknown beast that towered over her was scary enough and she would have refused if she could, but as soon as it kneeled its massive body and looked at Ruri with round eyes full of happy anticipation, she found herself hard pressed to say no. She reached for the magic beast’s head on her tiptoes and softly petted its boar-like hair.

It seemed to be letting out purrs of pleasure, but with the pitch of its grunts being so low it was kind of scary... no, it was downright terrifying. However, in spite of its hair appearing coarse and bristly, it was actually softer than she expected.

“Oh. I wasn’t expecting the texture to be this nice,” she said, as the spirits came over, curious to check it out for themselves.

And so, from that day on, Ruri found herself with a new pet—a *big* new pet.

Chapter 5: Spirit of Time

Morning arrived, sunlight pouring through the leaves and branches of the trees. The magic beast, unexpectedly dog-like in its loyalty and now known as “Kotaro” (named by Ruri), traveled with Ruri as she searched the forest for medicinal plants and food. She didn’t know which plants of this world were edible, but the spirits followed her like ducklings and took turns relaying information to her, so she wasn’t worried about plucking anything poisonous by mistake.

“How about this one?”

“That one is safe.”

“It has a funny texture when you eat it!”

Apparently, spirits themselves didn’t eat or drink, but they existed in every corner of this world, so information was often shared between them. Be it knowledge from spirits who lived somewhere devoid of humans or spirits who lived surrounded by humans, information on what was what would reach them.

In addition, while there were many magic beasts in the forest, Kotaro was apparently so strong that he stood at the top of the food chain in these woods. When she had praised him for this, he’d cried with pride. At first, Ruri was so afraid of him that she could barely come near without trembling, but once she finally got used to him, she realized that she could read Kotaro like a book—when he was scared, his tail would slump down; when he was praised, he would wag his tail like a dog. Ruri thought he was adorable.

Once she filled up the basket which Kotaro was holding diligently in his mouth, they all headed back to Chelsie’s place. Chelsie had refitted the barrier so that Kotaro could come inside as well. In front of the house, she was waiting with a big sheet spread out.

“We’re back.”

“Well, I’ll be. You brought back quite the haul.”

Ruri placed the contents of the basket atop the sheet and began sorting them by type. These were items they were going to sell later at the marketplace in the city. The medicinal plants and fruits that could be picked around Chelsie's house, which stood in this dense forest that no sane person visited, would fetch a hefty price in the city. The city had a large demi-human population, so the prospect of her first interaction with demi-humans shot Ruri's excitement through the roof despite the early hour. Seeing as how she would get to see people with cat and dog ears in real life, her enthusiasm was only natural.

As Ruri sorted the items while humming a tune, Chelsie stood beside her with a perturbed look on her face inspecting the medicinal grasses and fruits that Ruri had brought back.

"I need to teach this girl the value of things around here or it could spell trouble..."

"Hm? Did you say something?"

"Ruri, come here for a second," Chelsie said, calling Ruri over to her and proceeding to explain the medicinal grasses and fruits she'd picked out of the forest.

Ruri'd had no idea, but it seemed that the majority of what she picked as instructed by the spirits were either highly-effective medicinal plants or fruits that rarely appeared on the market in large quantities. These were rarities that you wouldn't normally find even in these parts. Ruri hadn't traveled too far out, so she assumed that these plants normally grew around here, but Chelsie informed her that was not the case.

Running a rough calculation on the price of these things made Chelsie pinch her temples, but seeing as how she'd never taught Ruri about currency in this world, the girl had no idea how much what she quoted actually was. All Ruri did know was that it was enough to make Chelsie rack her brain. Maybe it was the spirits' way of trying to please Ruri, but there were even some medicinal plants that were definitely out of season in the mix.

If they went out to sell this many rare items all at once, not only would it destroy their market value, but it was bound to draw unneeded attention. The last thing they needed was somebody with nefarious ideas putting targets on

their backs. The city they were going to was a smaller one far away from the royal capital and filled with demi-humans. Outsiders rarely visited, but nothing is ever certain.

Chelsie explained that if they were marked out by shady customers from out of town who couldn't see spirits, then it would mean trouble. And in this case, the trouble Chelsie was worried about didn't stem from Ruri herself but the spirits who would act to protect her and their effect on the area as a whole. So Chelsie decided against selling everything and brought only about half of what they had.

She took the remaining half in hand and chucked it in front of her. There, a rift of light suddenly appeared in mid-air and the plants that Chelsie threw disappeared into it. Chelsie continued to chuck fruits and plants into the rift, oblivious to Ruri looking on awe-struck, and within a matter of seconds, the pile of grass and fruits had vanished.

"Chelsie-san, what is that?! That thing there!"

"What? I just opened a pocket in space."

"How? A pocket in *what*?!"

Chelsie looked at a clearly agitated Ruri with a raised brow and after a second of thinking, it dawned on her. "Aah, you didn't know about this part of our world. Right." She then went on to explain, "You see, there is a 'Spirit of Time' who lives in a world of their own. So by opening this pocket in space, I access a passage to their dimension. Anything that enters this pocket will be frozen in time. That's why I threw those medicinal plants and fruits in there just now; so I can preserve them. It's one person per pocket and the size depends on the wavelength compatibility you have with the spirit and how much mana you possess. It's a relatively simple piece of magic that even a child with mana could cast."

"Then even I could do it?"

"Give it a try."

Probably due to all the video games she'd played in the past, she was able to effortlessly picture in her mind and manifest a shining round rift in the air. It felt

like it took more of her mana than usual, but faced with this astonishing pocket in space before her, that thought left her mind quickly.

“Ooh~!” She’d made one without any real effort, just as Chelsie said, which really made her stop and think on how magic truly could do just about anything in this world. So long as she had this, she’d never again have to struggle to carry heavy loads or worry about food going past the expiration date. This magic was simply incredible—a housewife’s best friend.

It wasn’t clear what had gotten into her as she stared at the floating pocket, but it compelled Ruri to stick her head into the rift of light. Chelsie’s eyes widened in shock. From the side, it looked like something out of a horror show—a headless torso just sitting there on the ground. Chelsie panicked, grabbing the nape of Ruri’s neck and pulling her out.

“Woah! What are you doing? You’re going to give me whiplash!” Ruri complained, rubbing her neck which was sore from being abruptly yanked.

“I’m the one who should be asking *you* that! What the *hell* are you doing?!”

“I was curious about what it looked like inside.”

“No one else would be dumb enough to stick their head inside a pocket!”

“Really?” Ignorance could be a terrifying thing. Unlike Chelsie, who was quaking in fear, Ruri simply looked blank before continuing, “But, you know... it’s pretty wide and bright in there.”

“It’s *what*?”

“Take a look for yourself, Chelsie-san.”

Ruri nudged the bewildered Chelsie, bringing her in front of the glowing rift in space. Although Chelsie protested vehemently, curiosity got the better of her and she gingerly put her hands on the surface of the pocket. Breathing in and holding her breath, she quickly plunged her head into the unknown.

“This is downright surreal...” Now that Ruri was looking at a woman without a head, she was speechless, realizing that this is what she must have looked like. Chelsie then pulled her head out, her mind blown.

“Chelsie-san?” asked Ruri, waving her hand in front of Chelsie’s face. Chelsie

jolted and snapped back to her senses. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little shocked. I never thought that’s what the inside of a pocket would look like.”

“You’ve really never been inside one before?”

“There’s a widespread belief that going inside one is impossible. Plus, the pocket that I’m able to make isn’t that big, so I couldn’t have gone inside it either way.”

Ruri thought for a bit. She wanted to stick her entire body inside, but she didn’t have any confidence that she would be okay judging from how stunned Chelsie looked. While she didn’t want to needlessly endanger herself, from what she’d observed when she’d poked her head inside, she knew that she could at least breathe in there.

“Ungh~ I want to go in, but what should I do?”

What would happen if the entrance closed or she couldn’t get out from the inside? Her curiosity and her anxiety were at odds with one another, and she racked her brain. Then, the spirits spoke to Ruri, giggling.

“It’s safe.”

“They’re telling you to come in.”

“‘Telling me to come in’...? *Who* is?”

“You’ll know once you go inside.”

Ruri locked eyes with Chelsie before coming to the conclusion that it had to be safe if the spirits said so. She made the rift big enough to fit her whole body through, and took the plunge.

Just as she’d seen a moment prior, the interior was a vast expanse of space. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were all pure white. With its high ceiling, the space resembled a giant storehouse. It didn’t have any clear sources of light like lamps or sconces, but it was bright enough to see everything around her clearly.

Chelsie followed her inside and took in her surroundings with great interest. “So this is what it looks like in here.”

“They said someone was calling me, but who?”

“Me.”

The unexpected third voice reverberated in Ruri and Chelsie’s heads, causing them both to jump in surprise and look around frantically for where it had come from. That was when, out of literally nowhere, a beautiful girl with a transparent body appeared, floating in mid-air.

“Gaaaaaaaah! A ghoooost!” Ruri exclaimed, belting out a loud, unladylike scream before hiding behind Chelsie, quaking in fear.

There were two things Ruri absolutely hated: bugs and ghosts. She knew that living in the forest without seeing a bug was a tall order, but she wanted to be at ease in the sphere of her daily activities, so she cast a barrier similar to Chelsie’s which prevented insects from coming near her. She was just as bad with ghosts and paranormal phenomena as she was with bugs. It made her forget that this newcomer looked like a very young maiden.

“Hey, settle down! This isn’t a ghost, it’s a spirit.”

“A spirit...?” Ruri timidly peeked out from behind Chelsie, halfway to tears, to see a young girl with long, pure white hair and golden eyes. She looked around Ruri’s age and stared back with an awkward expression on her face. She had a gentle demeanor, the aforementioned transparent body, and sprouting from her back were the same wings that the spirits around Ruri possessed. “But her size is on a different level...”

The spirits Ruri was familiar with were all palm-sized little runts, but the girl before her was regular human-sized, comparable to Chelsie and Ruri herself.

“This is because I am a higher level spirit than they. A spirit’s appearance will change according to the power they possess.”

Now realizing that she wasn’t a ghost, Ruri regained her composure and apologized for throwing such a huge fit. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry. You possess a large supply of mana, just as I’d heard. There truly aren’t very many people capable of creating a space this big... But after hearing about you from the spirits on the outside, I had to see you for myself. I can’t go out into the place you reside in, you see,” said the spirit with a somewhat lonely

expression.

“Why not? The pocket is still connected to the outside, we can go out together if you want.”

“... Thank you. But I am the Spirit of Time, so I cannot leave this dimension.”

“You’re the Spirit of Time?!” Chelsie abruptly screamed, startling Ruri.

“Chelsie-san, you’re going to give me a heart attack if you just up and yell like that again.”

“How do you expect me not to yell?! This is the *Spirit of Time*, child. A legendary spirit purported to never reveal itself to humans!”

“Huh, you don’t say...”

Upon seeing Ruri’s clueless reaction to her news, Chelsie slumped her shoulders in disappointment, saying, “Figured that would mean nothing to you...”

“Uh-huh, yeah, I just learned what a ‘Spirit of Time’ was a few moments ago. ...By the way, can a Spirit of Time fast forward and rewind time? Like looking at the world ten years into the future?” Ruri asked, the name “Spirit of Time” making the word “time slip” pop into her head, causing her imagination to run wild.

“Since controlling time requires a large amount of mana, moving time for the entire world would take more mana than the world has to offer.”

“But, time here is stopped, right?”

“This is my domain; I govern its time and space. This space is not the same as the outside world, so it is not bound by the flow of its time. Hence why that which crosses into this realm will retain the form it came in with.”

“So does that mean that as long as we’re in here, we’ll never age?”

“In a sense, yes. But if a living being were to stay here for a long duration, it would have negative effects on their psyche, so I do not recommend it. They might go mad or become unable to function, for instance...”

Her unsettling wording made Ruri and Chelsie both go pale.

“Then we should definitely get out of here!”

“Yes, let’s not dawdle.”

The two were about to make a break for the outside, but Ruri suddenly turned around to see the spirit smiling sadly back at them, all by her lonesome—a sight that hurt Ruri’s heart. “Say, are you here by yourself? Where are the other spirits?”

“I am the only one. The spirits outside will sometimes tell me of the goings-on of the outside world, but I cannot meet with them.”

“How long does it take? Being in this world before it affects you, I mean? A few hours?”

“Huh? Oh, well, I believe as long as you’re not here every day, it should be safe. And I believe that with your strong mana it would be harder for you to be affected than it would others.”

That was all that Ruri needed to hear, and she made up her mind. “Then I’ll stop by to keep you company every now and then.”

The spirit’s eyes opened wide as she uttered, “Huh...?”

“We’re planning on going to the city. I’ll buy you something interesting to play with, so you can look forward to that.”

“You’re going to come back to see me...?”

“Yes, I will.”

The spirit covered her face with her hands as her emotions proved too much to contain. A stream of tears began to roll down her face.

“Hic... Thank... you...” the spirit said, her words of appreciation disjointed from crying.

Then, Ruri wished her farewell and exited the dimension with Chelsie, who looked at Ruri with a reprimanding glare. The spirit told her that a small amount of time inside would be fine, but there was no way to ensure that it would be completely safe. Concerning news, but it still didn’t change Ruri’s mind.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Well, I couldn’t just leave her there...”

She was certainly afraid, knowing that she could go mad in there, but seeing the spirit’s forlorn expression had tugged at Ruri’s heartstrings. Ruri had always been lonely. She wasn’t able to make friends or pursue romantic interests without them going head over heels for Asahi immediately, so she’d basically had no one to open up to.

This situation was different, and while she hadn’t been completely isolated, seeing as how she was allowed to roam outside freely and see whomever she pleased, she understood loneliness and the yearning for companionship. Chelsie conceded, realizing nothing she could say would change Ruri’s mind.

First a pet and now a new friend. It made her recall being dumped into this forest to die, entirely alone, and she reflected in unexpected pleasure at how her life had taken such a happy turn.

Chapter 6: The Marketplace

After exiting the temporal domain, Chelsie and Ruri were planning to make their way to the marketplace in the Nation of the Dragon King, but...

“Chelsie-san, where is this marketplace anyway? Do you have a car or something?”

“Car... You mean a *carriage*? Of course I don’t. You see any horses around here?”

“Then how are we getting there?!” This place was surrounded by forest. It was extremely hard to imagine that the marketplace Chelsie spoke of was anywhere nearby.

“If we were to walk, it’d take us five days to get to just the nearest village.”

“Five days?! We have to walk that long?!”

“That’s only if we *were* walking, but no one said anything about that. Besides, the marketplace isn’t in the village, it’s in the city farther on.”

“Farther than that without any means of transportation aside from walking... Ah! Don’t tell me we’re going to warp like in some fantasy story or something?”

Leaving Ruri to brew in her growing excitement, Chelsie moved over to an area devoid of obstructions. She was then instantly engulfed in light. Ruri was left clueless as to what had happened as she squinted at the blinding mass of light which grew larger and larger until it was taller than the house and the trees around them.

“Woah woah woah woah!” Once the light faded, Chelsie had vanished and in her place was something else—a gargantuan reptile covered in hard scales with an equally large tail and a pair of wings. “Chelsie-san turned into a lizaaard!” Ruri screamed in sheer panic, but Chelsie retorted as she would normally.

“I’m not a lizard; I’m a dragon! Don’t group a proud race such as dragons with common lizards. It’s utterly disrespectful.”

That voice didn't come in through her ears but echoed directly into her head.

"That voice just now... Was that you, Chelsie-san?"

"I'm using what's called 'telepathy' to talk directly to your brain. I can't speak normally while in my dragon form."

"Dragon... So you were dragonkin this whole time, then."

Ruri'd thought Chelsie was a big lizard at first, but as she circled her dragon form and inspected her closely she saw clearly how wrong she'd been. She wasn't a serpentine creature from Eastern tales but a large winged dragon of Western lore. Nonetheless, she was quite... scary. Ruri was treating her normally because she knew it was really Chelsie, but if she didn't focus on that fact, the huge reptile's intimidating aura would make her shiver in her boots.

"Come now, quit dilly-dallying and climb on."

Apparently, they weren't going to hit the road but the skies. They certainly didn't need a car if that was the case.

"Uh, how? Climbing aboard is easier said than done..."

Right now, Chelsie towered over her at five stories high, and the scales adorning her body were too smooth to make any sort of climb up easy.

"You have magic, don't you? Use a wind spirit's power to levitate your body."

As she was instructed, she envisioned herself floating in the air and used her magic; her body started to levitate. However, she found it hard to keep her balance and couldn't hold herself in place, spinning out in mid-air.

"I know that it's hard to keep your balance at first, but once you get used to it, I'm sure you'll be flying side by side with me in no time. Just remember that flying consumes mana, so make sure to keep an eye on your mana reserves. Then again, that's probably something you don't need to worry about."

Once she'd clumsily reached Chelsie's head, she grabbed onto the horn atop it.

"Okay, we're taking off, so hold on tight."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Ruri replied energetically to Chelsie, who then took her gigantic body to the skies. In the blink of an eye, they ascended high enough to look down at the many trees of the forest below. Ruri had never been good on roller coasters, but despite being on Chelsie with no life line and only her horn to rely on, she surprisingly felt no fear. That was no doubt thanks to the wind spirits' magic that she felt all around her, which gave her a sense of surety that she didn't have to worry about falling to her doom even if she were thrown off.

Also, perhaps Chelsie had a barrier installed around them because the wind flowing past her was only as strong as a gentle breeze. The weather was excellent and visibility was high. Below them, the forest that housed Chelsie's home spread far. Looking down from above, the giant forest never ended. If someone were to get thrown in there without any equipment at all, they surely wouldn't make it out. It was a sobering reminder to Ruri that it was a miracle she had survived.

She would have withered away by now if it weren't for the spirits. To say that she was lucky was an understatement. And it was more likely than not that the people in Nadasha weren't banking on Ruri surviving in that forest either. Though, Ruri hoped that they *would* think she was dead and consider the case closed...

They had already passed the village that was supposed to take five days to reach in a matter of hours. Once they'd flown over a number of small settlements, a sprawling cityscape came into view. "*We're here,*" notified Chelsie as she landed on a spot that was quite a distance away from the city entrance. Although she would have liked to land a little closer to the entrance, Ruri descended from Chelsie's head. Soon after Ruri hit solid ground, Chelsie's body was once again engulfed in light and she returned to her familiar human form.

Next, she pulled out Ruri's brown wig from her space pocket and handed it to her, causing some confusion for Ruri. "I'd almost forgotten, but do me a favor and have that on before we enter the city. And make sure you *never* take it off while we're there."

"That's fine, but can you tell me why?"

“It’s because your hair color is extremely rare in this world. If you don’t act with caution, chances are a slave trader will set their sights on you, so be careful not to take it off in public under any circumstances.”

“There is slavery in this world?!” That news was a severe blow to Ruri since she was raised in a land to which the concept of slavery was totally foreign. Public safety in this world must be even worse than Ruri originally thought.

“Not here, but there are a fair number of nations where slavery is legal. Those belonging to uncommon races or possessing rare colors can be sold for a higher price, so cases of individuals being kidnapped aren’t uncommon. You seem to hail from a peaceful land, but you need to be careful. Especially around humans.”

Ruri was none too pleased to be lectured like a toddler, but she refrained from voicing her complaints. Something Chelsie said had caught her attention.

“Especially humans?”

“That’s right, humans.” Catching the hint that Ruri didn’t understand this warning, Chelsie ran her eyes around Ruri. Ruri followed where Chelsie was looking only to find the spirits, who had followed her as usual. Ruri cocked her head, completely stumped. Chelsie saw this and explained with a sigh. “The only people who would try to assault someone with this many spirits hanging around them is either a human without enough mana to see spirits or someone with a death wish.”

“Aren’t there demi-humans with weak mana as well?”

“Even if they can’t see them, demi-humans have senses that are a hundred times sharper than those of humans, so they will at least be able to sense the spirits with this many of them in one place. Still, only a handful of humans with strong mana can see them anyway. That is why I’m telling you to be careful so that you don’t end up getting targeted.”

“I’m not a *child*; I heard you the first time, thank you very much.”

If danger were to befall Ruri, then the *real* danger would befall everything around her. As they walked to the city entrance, Chelsie proceeded to give Ruri so many warnings that she felt her ears were going to fall off.

As soon as they passed the main gate, they found themselves in a... fuzzy, cuddly heaven. There were Western European-style buildings and stone-paved roads with establishments lining either end of the street, which was filled with shoppers. At least, that's what it looked like they were doing. The lack of any bags or goods in their hands made it hard to tell for certain, but that was most likely because of the space pocket magic that Ruri had just learned about today.

The sight of the city, seeing so many people in one place for the first time in a while, sent Ruri's already high excitement even higher. There were beast people who closely resembled humans but had animal ears and tails. There were beast people who were just the opposite, who resembled animals yet walked on two legs. A wide variety of different types of beings were walking here, there, and everywhere.

For the demi-humans that had a completely human form like Chelsie, it was difficult to tell what other form they might possess—or if they were even demi-humans at all, but, for the most part, this city was said to be comprised entirely of demi-humans. The children they saw in the streets all either had animal ears and tails or were beast-like in either the upper or lower portions of their bodies.

There were demi-humans still too young to assume complete human form; the small, fuzzy, and cuddly-looking children were absolutely adorable. She wanted to pet them so badly... She impulsively went up to one of the playing children and squatted down to meet them at eye level. She looked at their long, fluffy-looking cat tail standing on end. This cute little girl didn't appear to be experienced at taking human form, so in addition to her ears and tail, she also had other cat features like her nose and the whiskers along her face. The girl paused her playing and stared at Ruri blankly.

"Hey there, would you mind letting me give you a little pet?"

"Okay~"

Ruri was convinced that the child would be wary of a weirdo they'd never met before abruptly asking for permission to touch them, but, much to Ruri's surprise, the child agreed with relative ease. Ruri herself was worried over the little girl's lack of caution, but her cuteness coupled with her supple coat of fur made Ruri melt into a smile. She gave the child's ears a gentle stroke; they were

warm to the touch and twitched as if tickled, proving beyond a doubt that they weren't a costume. She continued, going over to a child with a white rabbit head straight out of Alice in Wonderland and petting them, too.

Their cuteness had Ruri enraptured. "Oh God, this is sheer bliss..."

"What are you doing, Ruri? Let's go."

"Look, Chelsie-san! They're super duper cute!"

"They're children; of course they'd be cute. Leave your detours for after we do what we came to do," Chelsie said, pulling Ruri by the arm.

Although reluctant to leave, she parted ways with the children, who waved farewell back to her. She then followed Chelsie closely, so as to not get separated in the busy city, and headed toward the marketplace. On their way there, Ruri couldn't hide her surprise at some of the beast people she saw walking down the street, but, for some odd reason, *they* looked just as surprised when they saw Ruri, which puzzled her.

In the city square, there was a huge selection of shops and shoppers. Not only were there foods, like fruits and vegetables, that Ruri had never seen before, but there was also a variety of different items with mysterious uses. Some had stalls and some just displayed their merchandise atop large tapestries laid out on the ground.

While what was for sale wasn't the same, this place reminded Ruri less of a marketplace and more of the flea market she would often visit on the weekends back in her world.

Ruri and Chelsie found an open area and spread a big tapestry on the ground, placing their own medicinal plants and fruits atop it. However, the intense stares they received from those around them were none too comforting. This staring had persisted ever since they entered the city. People would have shock written across their faces the second they saw Ruri and Chelsie, or they'd look at Ruri and start whispering to each other.

She checked to make sure she hadn't accidentally messed up her hair, but it was fine. Her wig was on straight, so her hair color wasn't the problem here. *(Do they find my outfit strange? Maybe my clothes are out of fashion, or*

something.) Ruri had borrowed the outfit she was wearing from Chelsie, but Chelsie didn't strike Ruri as being very fashion-forward since she lived alone in a massive forest, so its style being outdated was definitely possible.

As soon as she decided that was the case, she heard a child's voice. "Look, Mommy! That girl has a bunch of spirits hanging around her!"

The spirits that normally hung around on both sides of Ruri's shoulders and her head were an everyday sight to her now, but she recalled what Chelsie had told her about it being rare. Now Ruri understood why everyone had been staring at her this whole time.

"Just a guess, but do they see me as some kind of rare animal?"

"Something of the like, yes," Chelsie replied to Ruri's whispered question, making Ruri's stomach drop.

She had become a sideshow attraction without even realizing it. Even though she wanted to live as ordinary of a life as possible, she cared for these sweet spirits too much to ever consider shooing them away. She couldn't possibly bring herself to do so now. She regained her composure, focused on setting up their merchandise, and by the time things were all set up, Ruri's shop tapestry had gained a sizable crowd.

"Did you pick these medicinal plants yourself?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then, I'll take this."

"I'll take this one!"

"Hey, no cutting, jerk!"

They had only been open for a minute before it turned into a warzone, with customers pushing in one after another.

"Miss, please wrap these and these."

"Sure! ...Um, Chelsie-san, could I ask you to handle that?" Ruri asked, seeing as she had her hands full ringing up another person, but the customer who'd asked Ruri to wrap their purchase rushed to intervene.

“Ah, no, no. I want the young miss to do it.”

She was suspicious as to their insistence, but since there was no time to lob questions back and forth with droves of customers at her doorstep, she proceeded to fulfill their request.

“Miss, what do these medicinal plants help with?”

“Those? Umm, what was it again? Chelsie-san?”

“After drying them out, you grind those up into a powder, dissolve them in hot water, and drink the solution as cough medicine.”

“And there you have it.”

Customers kept trying to go through Ruri for everything. Whether it was handling the merchandise, taking payment for the merchandise, explaining the merchandise—they never once, without exception, asked Chelsie. Since she was so swamped, she would ask Chelsie to help her out, but everyone would try to intervene.

(But whyyy~?!)

Ruri couldn't tell one plant or fruit from another, didn't know the price of anything or even understand the currency, and couldn't calculate totals as a result. Meaning she had to go through the time-consuming process of asking Chelsie about every single thing as she worked. On top of that, she kept getting non-business related requests, too, such as handshakes and requests to pet their children's heads. Their stock disappeared in the blink of an eye. The rush was over and Ruri remained—the only one that was positively exhausted.

“You did so good, Ruri.”

“Good job!”

“Boy, why was I so singled out...? Chelsie-san was right next to me the entire time.”

“I told you that someone beloved by spirits as much as you is uncommon, didn't I? They're trying to get any drops of the spirits' power they can by touching either you or anything you yourself picked up.”

“You can receive a spirit's power with a handshake?”

“No, not at all. Let’s call it a matter of feeling over logic. Still, that just shows you how much the power of spirits drives this world; it’s essentially a religion. Demi-humans who can see spirits see you as a precious and sacred entity, so they want to interact with you as much as they can.”

“Well, better to be loved than hated, but I don’t think I can handle it if this is what happens every time...”

“I’m sure it will calm down if you visit the city a few more times. But be on your toes, regardless. This doesn’t mean that everyone bears only affection toward you. Don’t forget that there will be those seeking to manipulate you, so don’t go trusting strangers willy-nilly.”

“Yes, ma’am. Will do, ma’am,” Ruri replied, fed up that she was right back to getting an earful of incessant warnings.

As Ruri strolled around the city, looking to buy some necessities with the money she’d made off her sales, she made accidental eye contact with an older man standing at a shop selling fruit. He waved her over, and she cautiously approached him.

“How’s about it, young miss? They’re guaranteed delicious.”

The seller had a whole stock of fruits that she had never seen before in her world, all lined up in rows. He recommended one fruit, assuring her it was in season and ripe, but with its poisonous red and blue polka dot color palette, it honestly looked like you needed some serious courage to even take the first chomp. While Ruri wondered if this fruit was even edible, she decided to buy one to satiate her curiosity.

“Okay, I’ll take one, please.”

“Oh, don’t just take *one*, take a *bunch*,” replied the shopkeep, as Ruri proceeded to watch him put fruit after fruit in a bag, making her panic.

“No, wait! Just one is fine, I couldn’t afford all these right now anyway...” Ruri was planning on getting some other items after this and, since she didn’t know how much this was going to cost, she didn’t want to do any wasteful spending beforehand. However, the older man held out the bag filled with fruit with a warm-hearted smile.

“No need to pay me. This is my little gift to you.”

“Huh? But, uh... I couldn’t possibly...”

“It’s fine. It’s fine. In exchange, come back to this city again, will you? And if you keep me in mind and buy from my shop again, it’d be greatly appreciated!”

Ruri was bewildered, but Chelsie ordered her from the sidelines, “Take them, child.”

Ruri hesitantly took them and gave her thanks with a polite smile. “Okay then, I graciously accept. Thank you very much.”

“Come again, now.”

She waved goodbye to the generous fruit man and went about her business. Afterward, she took peeks at other shops and stalls—each time they gave her the warmest of welcomes—all the while Chelsie rebuked her for wandering around in her curiosity. Even though they were giving her more goods than she could hold, she hadn’t paid a single coin for any of it.

“Is this also because I have spirits by my side?”

“Any land where spirits gather becomes fruitful; the soil grows rich and natural disasters diminish. So, to answer your question: it’s because if you come here, the spirits will come, and if the spirits come, the land here will prosper. All of this is a small price to pay if it means getting you back here again.”

“Oh wow...” Spirits in this world were almost like deities, like Buddha back in her world. But considering you could actually see spirits here and magic was integrated so heavily into these peoples’ daily lives, their awe and reverence was probably immeasurable. Ruri was finally starting to piece together just how big of an impact spirits had in this world—as well as the dangerous power she held, merely by being adored by those very spirits.

(I hope I don’t get pulled into any more trouble, and yet...)

But those worries flew away in an instant when she realized this was her first shopping trip in forever. They had the clothes that she wanted and in large supply. Not those gaudy dresses with loads of frills they gave her in Nadasha, but functional clothes that were easy to move around in. The selection here

made Ruri breathe a sigh of relief. Nevertheless, fashion was different than in her world, and it wasn't commonplace for girls to wear pants here, with most wearing skirts or dresses. Be that as it may, since Ruri was living in the woods, pants she could be active in were a necessity.

It wasn't as if they didn't have a selection of pants, but none of them were all that cute. It made her contemplate just making some herself, but she wasn't good at sewing and getting a bespoke pair would be costly.

Out of options, Ruri settled on a pair of plain slacks. In addition to other personal items, like shoes and underwear, she bought a supply of preserved foods as well as seasonings. Once she was done, she climbed on Chelsie, back in her dragon form, and they flew back to their home in the woods.

Chapter 7: The Bracelet

The following day, Ruri was ready to present the Spirit of Time with the toy she'd bought at the marketplace, thinking it'd be the perfect fit for someone with an overabundance of time like her.

She opened up her pocket in space and headed inside.

On the inside, however, she was met with an unexpected sight. The space had been completely empty up until yesterday. She'd thrown in her purchases from the marketplace, but this expansive place influenced by Ruri's mana was supposed to have *much* more empty space. But, for whatever reason, there were tons of clothes she didn't remember buying, furniture she definitely hadn't put there, as well as some random items, like jewelry and weapons that she'd never seen before.

"What the heck is *thiiis*?!"

Perhaps picking up on Ruri's holler, the Spirit of Time phased in out of nowhere.

"I'm so glad... you actually did come back..." the Spirit of Time said, impressed that Ruri had come, and moved to tears. However, for Ruri, now wasn't the time to bask in this tender reunion.

"I hate to break up this emotional moment, but what is all this?!"

"I brought things that I thought you'd like," said the Spirit of Time with a cheery face, inviting praise with her tone.

This news, however, simply made Ruri's head spin. "You brought them from where?!"

"Why, from pockets of space that other people created, obviously. You know that I can't come out of this space, after all."

That was what most people would call "theft." Ruri was speechless.

"Put these back *now*!"

“But, Ruri... I thought this would make you happy.” Probably not expecting that Ruri might refuse her gift, the Spirit of Time was shocked and her eyes started to well up, as if she were about to cry at any moment.

Seeing this, Ruri softened her tone a few notches. “Believe me, I appreciate the sentiment. But taking someone else’s things is *definitely* not right.”

“It’s fine, if that’s your concern. These are all from pockets that don’t have owners anymore.”

“Don’t have owners *anymore*?” Ruri asked, trying to get her to elaborate, but in the next moment, instead of standing in the first room, filled to the brim with items, Ruri found herself standing on the steps of a staircase.

She peered over the side of the staircase, which seemed to descend endlessly, blurring her perception of height. The vertigo hit her almost instantaneously. Taking a look up revealed that the staircase also continued upward so far that she couldn’t see its end.

She was on a long, long spiral staircase with floating steps in a pitch-black void. With the staircase itself emitting a faint light, it basked both Ruri and the Spirit of Time in a pale blue glow. Though, it wasn’t enough to illuminate either end of the staircase given its extreme length.

“Where are we...?”

“This is the temporal domain I oversee. Humans aren’t allowed in here normally, but you’re special, Ruri. Just take a look beside the staircase. You can see those doors, right?”

There were doors floating right beside the outside of the staircase, glowing in a similar manner. One of those doors had the words “Ruri’s Room” written in large letters on it.

“That is your pocket of space—the one we were in up until a moment ago. The doors on this side are made so that only I can open them.”

“Does that mean that the other doors are other people’s pocket spaces?”

“Exactly. You can see that some doors are glowing and some are not, correct? The glowing ones have owners who are currently alive; the owners of the others

are no more. The things I brought into your room are things I simply moved in from rooms without owners, so you needn't worry about anything," the Spirit of Time assured, but Ruri was still worried.

"Even so, something doesn't feel right about just taking things out of them on your own..."

"I see bending the rules isn't your style, Ruri. With my past contract-bearer, they would take any and everything that seemed useful, since those things lacked an owner."

"Contract-bearer?"

"Yes. Simply put, a contract refers to a spirit lending their services and bestowing protection to a person they fancy. My past contract-bearer was a rarity, possessing enough mana to create a pocket large and wide enough to enter the temporal domain as well. They were a coarse, pompous annoyance to others... But they were also a kind-hearted soul." As the spirit said that, she appeared both happy and somewhat sad. It was enough to make Ruri realize the spirit was talking about someone special that she couldn't forget. *"Well, none of that matters now. Back to those things without owners. Since those spaces can only be opened by the person who made them, once their owner no longer exists, they'll start to gradually disappear, taking whatever is inside of them, too. In that case, I think it's much better if you were to use them."*

"They'll disappear?"

"Yes, it's necessary for space. There would just be doors into infinity otherwise."

Ruri was conflicted, but she didn't want to rely on Chelsie forever, and in this world without her family or anything else to fall back on, she decided that taking what she needed would be a wise choice.

"Okay, but only what I think I can really use."

"That is fine. Oh, right. I've left my previous contract-bearer's room around, but I'll move the contents to your room later."

"Huh? No, I couldn't. That was a special person to you, wasn't it?"

"It's fine, it's fine. They told me to give away everything to my next contract-bearer once I found them."

"...Hm?"

She said "next contract-bearer," but Ruri didn't remember agreeing to anything of the sort. The Spirit of Time noticed the suspicion on Ruri's face and, smiling, started to speak.

"When you left yesterday, I went ahead and made a contract."

"You did what now...?"

"It only makes sense. I've come to fancy you a lot." The Spirit of Time clasped her hands together and apologized for her assumption in an adorable manner. Ruri, however, slumped in disappointment.

Then, in the blink of an eye, the Spirit of Time teleported them to her former contract-bearer's pocket space. It was several times larger than the space Ruri had created, and a simple scan of the area showed that every single corner was stacked with valuable-looking jewelry and weapons, leaving Ruri awe-struck.

"...Is it really okay for me to take all this?"

"Of course. I can connect to your pocket space and move it there later, but if there's anything that piques your interest, feel free to take it now."

Ruri may have had no idea about the value of things in this world, but she at least knew that the jewelry casually strewn at her feet was not cheap. She looked around, this intensely bright and sparkly room giving her a headache all the while, until a single bracelet caught her eye. It was a thin, gold bracelet with small jewels set in the middle and a pattern etched on it all the way around.

"It's so pretty..."

In addition to the bracelet, she also picked up a few things like a necklace she could give to Chelsie and a knife and bow-and-arrow set, well suited to the forest. Then she returned to her own room. Ruri was so blinded by all the expensive-looking things and overwhelmed trying to choose a few, that she didn't hear the Spirit of Time's warning about one of her selections having a shady history behind it.

“By the way, what is your name anyway? ‘You’ isn’t a proper name and ‘Spirit of Time’ doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue.”

“It’s Lydia.”

“Lydia? Okay, got it,” Ruri said, calling the spirit by her name. Once she heard it, Lydia beamed with the biggest smile Ruri had seen to date.



After Ruri parted ways with Lydia and returned to the real world, she wasted no time giving Chelsie her gift.

“I’m back, Chelsie-san.”

“Welcome back. Nothing feeling off, I take it?” Chelsie asked, checking in on Ruri’s condition in concern, knowing that being in the temporal domain had negative effects on people’s psyches.

“I’m fine. Apparently, I was contracted without even realizing it, but she said any effects would be minimal.”

“...You made a contract with the Spirit of Time?” Chelsie asked, aghast in wide-eyed shock as if she couldn’t believe her ears.

“Seems so. Oh, Chelsie-san, I brought you back a present,” said Ruri as she placed the jewelry and weapons she’d brought from the pocket of space on the table. Ruri was all smiles, thinking that it would be sure to please Chelsie, but the old woman’s reaction was quite the opposite.

“What in the *hell* is this?!” Chelsie exclaimed so hard her eyes seemed like they were going to pop out of her skull. “Take a seat,” she ordered, preparing to bust out into a lecture for some reason.

“Huh?”

“No questions; just sit. *Now!*”

“Yes, ma’am...” Confused by the unexpected reaction, she sat down.

Chelsie, her eyes looking intense, started her inquisition. “Where in blazes did you get these from?! You didn’t get these from the city, did you? Regardless of how much the spirits like you, you shouldn’t just take things that could be from

who-knows-where!”

“Huh? Wait, you have it wrong!” she quickly interjected as it seemed that Chelsie had assumed that the spirits had taken these from somewhere, so she explained from the top.

“You got them from the Spirit of Time? From other space pockets and the prior contract-bearer?”

“Yes, that is right. Lydia said that it was okay to use them as I wished because they had no owner. ...Chelsie-san?” Ruri watched in confusion, head cocked, as Chelsie cut her reaction short before saying that she had a headache and returning to her room.

“Ah... what should I do with these?” Ruri asked, but since Chelsie had already left the room, her words echoed sadly. Ruri had imagined that her presents would have Chelsie jumping for joy, but instead it left the girl slumping her shoulders without a clue as to what she’d done wrong.

She settled down in her room, flopping onto her bed with a sigh. Then she pulled out the bracelet she’d picked out not too long ago. With its exquisite craftsmanship and shining jewels, the bracelet was entrancingly beautiful.

“It doesn’t seem like I’ll have a problem making a living now, but, all things considered, maybe I *should* be scared...” She was starting to get worried now about coming into a massive fortune out of the blue, but if word ever spread that she was sitting on such a goldmine, there was a huge possibility that money-grubbers would come gunning for her.

She decided that not telling anyone other than Chelsie was the best idea. Then, she put on her new bracelet and let the warm rays of the sun whisk her off to a gentle slumber. By the time Ruri woke up, the sun was already starting to set and nightfall was approaching. Realizing what time it was, she arose in a rush to get dinner started, but when she did, she felt an odd sense of displacement.

(Huh? Something’s not right...)

The scenery in her room looked different from usual, but all the furniture was in the same place it had always been in, so she couldn’t figure out what was off.

With a mysterious feeling of dissonance in the back of her mind, she tried to get out of her bed—which was when she caught sight of her hand, now small and covered in fluffy white fur. Turning the hand revealed an oh-so adorable pink and squishy paw pad. After sitting stock still in shock for a few moments, Ruri screamed.

“Wrrao reooooow!” However, the scream that came out from Ruri’s mouth didn’t match up with the words in her mind, causing her to panic even more. *(What the hell is going on heeeere?!)*



Hearing the loud shriek, Chelsie opened the door to Ruri's room. "What's the commotion, Ruri? Hurry up and help me with din... ner..." Ruri, however, was not there; a single white cat was there in her stead. "Well, I'll be. How in the heck did a cat get in here and from where? Did Ruri bring it in here? I swear, that girl..."

(Cat?! I've turned into a cat?!) She'd thought that was simply impossible, but her hand was telling her that she was indeed a cat. And for even more proof, Chelsie looked at Ruri and called her a cat as well—something that caused Ruri to scramble to reply.

"Meow, mraow mroow (Chelsie-san, it's me. Ruri,)" she desperately pleaded, but her cat speech wasn't getting through in the slightest, prompting Chelsie to interpret her sentence completely differently.

"What's that? Are you hungry?"

"Mya-uuh! (No, you're way off!)" Just when Ruri had given up all hope of Chelsie realizing that it was her, the spirits came to her aid.

"This kitty is Ruri."

"Ruri turned into a cat, yup."

"She got all small, so we can't ride on her shoulder anymore."

"What's stopping us from riding on her back, though?"

Ruri gave the spirits a mental thumbs-up for the help, but also raised a mental eyebrow over why they wanted to ride on people so bad in the first place. Upon hearing the spirits' say that, Chelsie looked at the white cat in surprise, hesitantly addressing it to check.

"...Is that really you, Ruri?"

"Meow meow." Since Chelsie wasn't able to understand what she was saying, she nodded her head as hard as she could. Chelsie didn't seem entirely convinced.

"Ruri is supposed to be human, right? And according to her, there aren't any demi-humans in her world, so don't tell me she has some catkin blood in her or something," Chelsie said, pondering this with a low hum. The spirits once again

came back with a response.

“It’s because of that bracelet Ruri is wearing.”

“It’s an ancient bracelet that turns you into a kitty!”

Chelsie turned her eyes toward Ruri’s front legs and, sure enough, there was a bracelet wrapped around one of them. The bracelet had been big enough to fit around her wrist when she was human, but now that she was a cat, it had shrunk and fit neatly around her cat-arm. As a test, Chelsie tried to take the bracelet off of Ruri’s front leg. The piece of jewelry slid off without any resistance and reverted to its original size. As for Ruri, just as when Chelsie turned into her dragon form, she was engulfed in light and reverted to human form in the blink of an eye. Ruri looked at her no-longer cat-hand.

She touched her face and body to confirm that she had turned back to normal and the results filled her with wholehearted relief. “Oh thank *God*! I suddenly turned into a cat and lost my ability to speak words and I thought I would *never* turn back!”

“Sigh. First, you make a contract with the Spirit of Time. Next, you turn yourself into a cat. Ruri, there’s never a dull moment with you, I swear.”

After taking the bracelet from the weary-looking Chelsie, she quickly headed back to Lydia and had her explain. Apparently, the bracelet was not a harmless piece of jewelry but a magic tool created long ago, which would transform the wearer into a cat regardless of whichever race they actually belonged to. She went on to explain that it was made by a person who held an extraordinary fascination with cats and creating the bracelet had been their life’s work. It was a show of tenacity that no one around them could quite comprehend.

Ruri loved fluffy and cuddly animals, so she would have loved to talk shop with them, but they had lived and died eons ago. She probably could have formed a pretty good friendship with them, too, but it wasn’t meant to be—a fact that she lamented immensely. But Ruri’s lament quickly turned to joy as she realized she now held a great item.

It came with a lesson, however—a lesson to *always* listen when someone is talking.

Chapter 8: The Medicinal Tea

One day Ruri, now pretty adjusted to life out in the woods, decided to get Chelsie to teach her how to make medicines out of plants. When they'd gone to the city a few days before, they'd sold medicinal plants and fruits as is, but Chelsie informed her that you can also sell them as jams or medicine.

The idea of Chelsie making medicines and whatnot made her seem more and more like the traditional idea of a "witch." Ruri's heart was pounding in excitement to see what process she used, but it ended up being as plain as plain could be.

You would chop the plants, toss them into a mortar and crush them, or use pre-dried plants and boil them in hot water, et cetera, et cetera. There wasn't a single fantasy-like element to the whole thing. It felt more like a cooking class than a sorcery lesson.

"This is so *boring*, Chelsie-san. Isn't there a more magical witchy way of doing this?"

"And what is this 'magical witchy way' you speak of? These are all folk remedies that I've learned through my long years of experience, and anyway, I'm not a 'witch,' so I can't make medicines like they do."

"...So there *are* real witches." She meant her question as a joke because she knew that Chelsie was a dragonkin and not a witch, but there apparently were real witches, leaving Ruri to marvel over the wonders this fantasy world had to offer.

"Somewhere, yes. You'll probably never meet one because they put up barriers so people won't find them. Anyway, keep your hands moving. We're going to be making a lot more."

"Yes, ma'am," Ruri replied, doing as she was told and using the kitchen knife she was holding to dice up the green leaves, move them to the mortar, and crush them up.

They were apparently making a medicine effective against bruises and muscle pain that you rubbed over the afflicted area.

“You can do it, Ruri~”

“Bmoooo!”

The spirit riding on Ruri’s shoulder cheered, and Kotaro, poking his head in from the kitchen window, followed in kind, letting out an earth-trembling cry.

Ruri smiled in response to their shouts and went about her uneventful work, but as she did, a cold sweat gradually formed on her brow.

(Wha? How did it turn out looking like this?) She was simply mashing the plants; it was a straight-forward task. There wasn’t anything to screw up.

Yet, the plants she had in front of her, which had completely changed in appearance, said otherwise. Ruri started to panic.

“Chelsie-san... what do I do about this?”

“Do about what?” Chelsie stopped her own mashing to peek at Ruri’s work from the side and froze in place.

“...Ruri, what did you do?” Chelsie asked, assuming that Ruri must have done something. Ruri’s eyes widened in surprise. “Don’t blame me! I was just mashing them up like normal, that’s it!” Even if she did have a track record of similar incidents, pinning the blame on her was cruel. Ruri pleaded her innocence.

“Normal mashing doesn’t make them look like this, child.” The leaves that Ruri had been working with were green, but, for whatever reason, as she was turning them into pulp, their color had gradually started to change. Now they were a pink so bright and vibrant that it seemed completely outside the realm of reality.

“Did you add some other plant in by accident?”

“No, I made sure that they were all the same leaves before I put them in.”

“Well, even so... try it once more.” She moved the plants that were in the mortar and gave it a thorough washing. The water spirits scrambled to offer their services and made a little kerfuffle over who would get to do the job, but

they decided through rock-paper-scissors, a game that Ruri had taught them.

They seemed to have some doubts over why paper beat rock, but this choosing-method game struck the right chord for the spirits, and rock-paper-scissor competitions started up now and then. She'd asked Chelsie if there were any games like rock-paper-scissors in this world, but, apparently, there wasn't anything of the sort. It probably seemed fresh in the spirits' eyes as it was something a tad different than usual.

This time, when Ruri added the leaves to the bowl to mash them up it was under Chelsie's careful supervision.

"Okay, now try it."

"Right."

Chelsie stared intently as Ruri worked, determined not to let the change slip by her. And, sure enough, despite simply crushing the green leaves, they started to change color. However, this time it wasn't pink; it was a yellow ocher color. This was completely baffling.

"Chelsie-san?" Ruri asked, hoping that Chelsie would know the cause, but Chelsie looked just as confused as she did. As a test, Chelsie started over, mashing the plants from scratch, but she produced a mash that was just as green as when she put the leaves in. This basically proved that Ruri was the cause but didn't narrow down why that might be.

"What in blazes is going on here...?"

"You don't know the reason why either, Chelsie-san?"

"I haven't a clue." As the two pondered over this phenomenon, Kotaro gave a few *bmoos* to get Ruri's attention while poking his head in through the window.

"What's wrong, Kotaro?"

"Bmoo-mm, bmoo, bmoo!" Kotaro cried, poking his nose at the container that held the transformed plants and then pointing it toward the spirits engaged in their rock-paper-scissors competition.

"...Do you mean the spirits are the cause?" Ruri replied, and Kotaro nodded his head repeatedly as if to tell her yes.

“Well, that makes sense. After all, the differences between you and me lie within both our mana and our differing attraction for spirits. I’ve never heard of the amount or quality of one’s mana causing changes of this sort, so the cause here must be the spirits.”

Ruri called them over from their rousing rock-paper-scissors session. “Hey, guys? I’m sorry to break up the fun, but could we talk?”

“Sure, it’s fine~”

“Ooh, about what?” As soon as Ruri called them, they dropped what they were doing and huddled around her.

“The color of these medicinal plants changes whenever I mash them, do you guys know why?”

“Yup, we do.”

“Cause everyone is trying their best for you.”

“Once they heard that you’re making medicine, the tree and flower spirits loaded the trees with their blessings.”

“Also, Lady Lydia is the highest level of spirit, with the greatest amount of power. Since you’ve made a contract with her, it might be easier for you to draw on the power of spirits now.”

“Um, that’s a lot to take in, but basically all of you spirits bestowed the plants with special powers? And it visibly changed for me because I have a contract with Lydia but won’t for Chelsie-san because she doesn’t?”

“That’s right!”

“Well, there you have it, Chelsie-san.”

“So you *are* the cause after all. These spirits were working on your behalf,” Chelsie said with a weary sigh.

“Wait, but I didn’t *ask* for them to do this,” Ruri retorted, waving her hands in front of her in denial.

“Are we causing trouble?” Ruri looked as several of the spirits, who’d apparently given the plants their alms, started to look glum with sad, shivering

eyes. They were clearly hurt by Ruri's blunt phrasing, which made it sound as if their help was unwanted. The adorable spirits' distraught expressions filled Ruri with intense regret. Although her words had been born out of reflex, she admonished herself in her mind, wondering why she'd been so insensitive.

"No, not at all. I was just a little surprised. Thanks for working so hard for my sake, guys." Ruri pasted on a smile and thanked them, which brightened up their little faces.

"You're welcome!"

Next to the relieved Ruri, Chelsie stared at the enchanted plants with an uneasy expression.

With the spirits' moods now lifted, Ruri questioned their explanation further.

"So, I'm just wondering, what is this 'highest level of spirit' you all mentioned? You said that Lydia was one of those, right?"

"Spirits get levels based on their power. And the highest level of spirits are literally the most powerful of all spirits."

"There are twelve spirits of the highest level and Lady Lydia is one of them."

"High level spirits are the big shots!"

"Wow, so Lydia is *actually* amazing." Ruri was still quite new to things concerning spirits, but she had more or less understood that Lydia was a powerful spirit.

She marveled at these events to herself before turning her attention back to Chelsie.

"...By the way, Chelsie-san?"

"What is it?"

"I noticed that whatever that is that you made has a rather abnormal, um, *aroma*." It had been bugging her for a good while now. She thought that some odor would come with the territory, since they were dealing with medicines, and she thought that it would be bearable. But the more time that passed, the more the nose-wrinkling, foul odor permeated the room.

“Aah, I’d almost completely forgotten,” Chelsie replied, checking and stirring her smelly pot that boiled with medicinal plants and fruits. She poured the contents of the pot through a strainer, removing the plant matter, and placed the resulting broth into a bottle.

“So what is this?”

“A medicinal tea. It’s a big seller.”

“Huh? *That* sells?! I mean, you can *drink* that?!” Ruri asked, stunned to hear that it wasn’t a failed batch and that you’re supposed to put such a foul-smelling concoction in your mouth. She gave Chelsie a dubious look, clearly questioning who would buy such a concoction.

“Wanna give it a taste?” Chelsie offered with a sly smile, pouring a mouthful of the brew into a cup and passing it to Ruri.

(Ugh, it stinks! But it’s apparently drinkable, so it might be tastier than it seems) Ruri thought, enduring the horrible smell. She took a quick sip while pinching her nose and...

“Mm-ugh~!” The taste was, astonishingly, even more putrid than the smell. No, “putrid” didn’t even begin to describe it. This was a deadly weapon. It was hazardous material.

As she suffered from the agonizing impact of the drink climbing up her mouth and into her nose, Chelsie handed her some special honey juice, which she chugged down in one swig. However, it still couldn’t help wipe away the horrible taste radiating through her mouth.

“Urk~! What the heck is this?! This isn’t something people should be drinking!” Or maybe demi-humans had non-functioning taste buds?

“You’re in luck, since you’re a human. There are some demi-humans with sharp taste buds who pass out.”

“I don’t see the point in drinking something with such a side effect!”

“It may knock you out, but it’s benefits are extremely potent. It can cure a cold with one shot.”

“I feel like you’d still be getting *worse* if the medicine makes you pass out,

though...” If she was given the choice between catching a cold or drinking some extremely rancid medicinal tea, then she would, without a shadow of a doubt, take the cold. There had to be other medicines that weren’t like *this*, anyway.

That being said, she didn’t know how far the medical technology of this world had come, so if it wasn’t on par with her world, then she could understand the reasoning behind relying on such rancid-smelling cures.

Ruri swore in her heart that she would never *ever* catch a cold again.

The following day, they took the finished medicine off to the city and, as per usual, Ruri had her brown wig on her head.

Ruri couldn’t fly on her own yet, so she was riding on Chelsie in her dragon form.

The trip took a few hours so they left early in the morning, and, by the time they arrived, the city was bustling with people.

It was only her second trip to the city, but it seemed that word of Ruri had already spread throughout the town, so few were surprised as Ruri walked around with her spirits in tow, at least not to the degree they had been last time.

Once they started setting up their shop space in the city square, groups of people began lining up, not only for Ruri but for Chelsie’s medicines as well. Although Chelsie’s medicinal teas were selling, not many people were coming to buy Ruri’s medicine.

Everyone seemed bewildered. Their reactions stood to reason, however, looking at her assortment of strange orange-yellow and pink-colored medicines.

An older man seemed as though he wanted a bottle, but was too afraid to buy one. He came up to Chelsie, inquiring.

The last time, he’d asked every question through Ruri, but he was probably so astonished that he forgot to this time—even though Ruri was the one who made the medicine in question.

“Lady, did you screw up a little with the medicine today? What’s with this

color?”

“I didn’t screw up. Ruri made all the medicine with the weird colors.” All eyes fell on Ruri, so she nodded in confirmation.

Chelsie took the opportunity to tack on an addendum. “Apparently, the spirits added some of their power to the medicinal plants to appease her. I know it looks odd, but the effects have the spirits’ seal of approval and they’re in limited supply. First come, first served,” said Chelsie with a sly grin, and not long after hearing her explanation, all of the customers came to grab Ruri’s medicines. Unsurprising, since they had the extra value of being endowed by the spirits. The fact that Ruri found more unbelievable was that Chelsie’s rancid medicinal tea was also flying off the shelves.

“Yikes, this crap *does* sell...” Ruri muttered to herself in a tone of deep disbelief, questioning her customers’ sanity.

A purchaser of the rancid tea overheard her and gave a wry smile. “Come now, don’t say that. The old lady’s medicinal teas work really well. ...Even if some do taste bad.”

“Yeah, so bad that you see your life flash before your eyes,” added a customer, who had also bought some of the medicinal tea.

One sale followed another and the medicine eventually sold out. Ruri went to pack things up with the spirits’ help when the last customer, a girl, addressed her.

“I hear that there’s been a lot of pickpocketing around these parts lately. You two should be careful.”

“Right, thank you very much for telling us.”

Since they put all of their stuff into the pocket space right away, Ruri assumed pickpocketing was a non-issue. The customer’s warning went in one ear and out the other.

Once they finished packing up, their next course of action was buying some groceries in town.

“Let’s see... seasonings, vegetables, milk, flour, and butter. And this meat means we’re done, right?” Ruri confirmed with Chelsie, pointing at each item they’d planned on buying as to make sure she wasn’t missing anything.

“Indeed, that’ll do it for today.”

Ruri took the bagged meat from the shopkeep.

Unlike the butcher shops in her world, the poultry and other carcasses were visible in the store front, hanging upside-down. It was a considerably shocking sight for Ruri, since she’d only seen meat in packages. She tried her best to avert her eyes.

“Ere you go. And I knocked the price down a li’l, too.”

“Thank you, mister!” Unlike when she came to the city last time, they seemed to be accepting her money, but Ruri suspected they were giving her more than just what she’d ordered. Since she could just put it in her pocket of space without fear of it rotting, she gratefully accepted the package, extras and all.

Without the pocket it would probably spoil since there were no refrigerators in this world. Three cheers for magic! She took her goods and was about to pull out her purse to pay with her earnings when someone bumped into her.

A shock ran through her body and she almost fell to the ground, but she steadied her legs and regained her footing.

“Quit gettin’ in the way, girl!”

“*Pardon?!* ”

It was a young man. Despite the fact that *he* was the one that came crashing into *her*, his remark was framed as if Ruri was the one at fault. She thought about giving the man a piece of her mind, but, faster than she could even blink, he had already hightailed it out of there.

“What was *his* deal? I swear...”

“*Ruri, are you okay?*” The spirits were so concerned that you’d think it’d happened to them. Their concern helped to soothe her.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Should we get him?”

“Pummel some manners into him?”

“Thank you, guys. But that won’t be necessary.” The spirits seemed raring to go on Ruri’s command, which she did not give. The dissatisfied looks on the spirits’ faces were adorable, but what they were trying to do would have been far from gentle.

Although she was peeved, a little bump between two people wasn’t enough of an ordeal to enlist the spirits’ help.

Recalling what Chelsie had warned, about the spirits being dangerous, she figured that something like this might happen. Though, it seemed like they were less *dangerous* and more *quick to pick a fight*, but that was neither here nor there.

She felt secretly pleased, though, over the spirits getting so riled up on her behalf, and over something so trivial. Ruri quietly considered that this might just be the type of actual friendship that she’d always wanted. The feeling of being so genuinely concerned for someone that you’d put yourself in harm’s way in order to stick up for them—

A feeling that she’d never had with Asahi...

“Anyway, back to paying for... paying for... huh?” Ruri said as she tried to pay for her goods, but the purse she’d been holding a second ago was now nowhere to be found. “Huh? Wha?!” She looked around, thinking that she must have dropped it when she took her bump, but she didn’t see it anywhere.

“Aah, it got swiped, li’l miss. There’s been a lot of pickpocketing here as of late,” said the butcher, looking at her pityingly.

“No doubt that man from earlier, I take it,” Chelsie calmly discerned.

“Why are you taking this so nonchalantly?!” exclaimed Ruri. “That guy is *not* getting off on my watch! Guys, help me find that guy!” She had her sights set on eating Chelsie’s famous beef stew tonight, but that wasn’t going to happen if she couldn’t buy the meat!

“On it~”

“Ah, now hold on, Ruri!”

Ruri brushed off Chelsie’s attempt to stop her and chased after the man, the spirits trailing after her. Beef stew was the only thing on her mind.

Not only did the spirits that had been following Ruri rally together, but spirits that lived in the city joined in as well, forming a huge dragnet. Through the spirits’ unique information network, the man’s description had already been circulated around to all of them.

There was no way he could escape under these conditions. They quickly confirmed the man’s location. He was smiling jovially, Ruri’s purse clutched in one hand. He was clearly human and either had little or no mana, as he didn’t seem to notice the spirits floating over his head, matching his walking speed. It was the demi-humans around him that were looking at the man, and the space above his head, in wide-eyed shock. They didn’t know what had happened, but they figured from the spirits’ expressions that the man had clearly done something to upset them all. The demi-humans gave the man a wide berth so as to not get involved.

Ruri used the huge cluster of spirits as a landmark and made her way over. As soon as she caught sight of the man who’d stolen her purse, she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“There you are! Give me my purse back *now!*”

Ruri’s shout made the man jump in surprise. The second he turned around, the massive swarm of spirits started to dogpile onto his body.

“Huh?! What the hell? I can’t move!” Although he himself couldn’t see them, the mob of spirits were clinging to his body like invisible weights, so, of course, he couldn’t move. Though, the spirits had neither weight nor physical bodies, but they could touch and pull on things that had traces of mana.

With his entire body immobilized, the man couldn’t run away even if he weren’t shocked into stillness. All he could do was watch as Ruri approached him.

“How... dare... you...!”

“Eek!”

Ruri approached him with the face of a raging demon, making the man pathetically yelp in response.

And while the face was scary, it had to be noted that it was still being made by a young girl. However, the fear from being unable to move just made it that much worse.

Ruri's eyes stopped at her purse, clutched in the man's frozen hand, and she effortlessly reclaimed it from him. She checked inside to see that no money had been taken out. It seemed as though she'd caught him before he had a chance to spend any, which was a relief.

That was around when Chelsie finally caught up with Ruri, so the girl raised her reclaimed purse in the air for Chelsie to see.

"Look, Chelsie-san, I got it back! Now I can buy the meat."

"...I already paid for the meat; none of this was necessary. Did you even think about what would happen when you pulled off something so dangerous? I swear..." Chelsie said, exasperated at Ruri's desperate escapade to reclaim her purse.

"Huh? You had extra money on you this whole time?! But, wait, that doesn't change the fact that I had *my* money stolen. And, besides, catching this guy was for the benefit of society. After all, I'm sure he's caused plenty of damage to others."

"I can't help but be paranoid with you acting before you think, y'know," Chelsie commented with a sigh. "In any case, turn that guy over to one of the guards."

The man jumped in fear at the word "guards" and struggled to get away, but it was to no avail; he was still being restrained by the spirits.

Meanwhile, the guards had heard that a huge mob of spirits was chasing after a single man, so they came to see what the trouble was.

Once the guards arrived, Ruri handed the man over to them, releasing him from the spirits' grip and allowing him to move freely, much to his relief. She explained the situation to the guards, wrapping up the whole ordeal. Or so she thought...

The man looked at Ruri and spat a resentful comment under his breath. “Tch, snot-nosed li’l brat.”

“Looks like he’s not the least bit sorry for his actions...” Ruri’s sharp ears picked up his comment and she turned to Chelsie. “Chelsie-san, you still have some of that medicinal tea left, right?”

“Yeah, I have some for use back at home.”

“Would you let me have it?”

“Sure, I don’t mind, but what are you going to use it for?” Chelsie pulled out a bottle about the size of a 500 ml travel-sized bottle from her pocket in space. It was filled to the brim with the putrid medicinal tea.

Ruri popped open the bottle’s lid and had the spirits restrain the man once more.

“W-What are you doing?!” Held once again by some invisible force, the man quaked in fear as he watched Ruri.

“Since you don’t seem to be sorry for what you’ve done, I’m going to make sure you never do something like this again!” Ruri placed the opening of the bottle into the man’s mouth and slowly tilted it.

“U-Urk!” he choked in discomfort, but Ruri made him drink every last drop in the bottle.

Back when Ruri taste tested the concoction, a single mouthful was enough to send terrible shockwaves down her spine. Chelsie told her that the proper dosage was about a small medicine cup’s worth. If he were to drink a whole bottle’s worth, then the shock he’d take would be immeasurable.

Fortunately, drinking it in mass volume wouldn’t have any damaging side-effects; in fact, it would help improve his long-term health. However, the effect on his tongue after drinking the swill was pure trauma and would serve as a painful reminder whenever he would even consider pickpocketing in the future.

“You’re pretty ruthless, Ruri.”

“Tee hee hee, I bet he won’t ever think about trying to steal money from other people again.”

Perhaps the guards also knew about the taste of Chelsie's tea, because they looked at the man, now passed out after being unable to bear the taste, with pity in their eyes and mouths screwed up in sympathetic distaste.

Chapter 9: The Prank

It was a little after dinner when the two returned from the city.

Once the guards had hauled away the unconscious pickpocket, a patisserie suddenly caught their attention and they'd purchased cake. They had been looking forward to eating it for tonight's dessert.

After brewing some tea, Ruri put her hand into her pocket space, ready for her treat, and pulled out the box she received at the patisserie. There were supposed to be two pieces—one for Ruri and one for Chelsie—but, for whatever reason, there was only one piece inside.

Not only that, but what had gone missing wasn't the cheesecake that Chelsie had ordered but the fruit tart that Ruri had ordered.

"Huh? That's odd."

"What's odd?"

"There's only one piece of the cake here. I'm positive that there *were* two, though... I'm going to go take a look." When she'd ordered the cakes, the worker had confirmed that there were indeed two in the box. Ruri's crafted space couldn't be opened by anyone but Ruri. Given those facts, that left only one feasible possibility.

She opened the entrance to her pocket space and went inside, calling Lydia's name.

Even if Lydia didn't know where her cake had gone off to exactly, searching through the inheritance she'd received from Lydia's previous contract-bearer for it would be an arduous process, so asking Lydia for help was the fastest solution.

Lydia appeared as soon as Ruri called her name.

"What's the matter, Ruri?"

"I bought two pieces of cake today and put them in my space, but when I got

hungry and looked inside, I only found one. Do you know what happened to my cake, Lydia?”

Once Ruri asked that, Lydia’s expression became awkward, as if she were startled.

“Lydia... don’t tell me...”

“Tee hee hee, sorry... I ate it,” Lydia admitted with a smile that said she’d almost tacked an ‘ehehe’ on at the end of that statement.

Ruri slumped her shoulders in disappointment. “No way... I was looking forward to that...” Unlike in her world, here she couldn’t just step out to the convenience store to buy sweets. It would take several hours to reach the city even riding on Chelsie, and it wasn’t like she could just go out and buy another one right now—things just weren’t that simple. She couldn’t convince herself to go that far just to buy a slice of cake. The only times they would go into town was to sell medicine and to buy groceries—both of which they had just done today. Realistically, she would have to put her plans vis-a-vis cake-eating on hold for a while.

“My fruit tart...” She was in utter shock.

“I’m sorry. Ever since we’ve started talking, it’s made me wax nostalgic about my time with my previous contract-bearer, so I had the craving for the first time in a long time.” Lydia seemed rather down on herself, as if sorry for what she’d done.

Hearing Lydia’s story about remembering her previous contract-bearer fondly all alone in this sectioned-off space, Ruri couldn’t get angry even if she wanted to.

“It’s whatever. I’ll just go and buy another slice later. More importantly, Lydia, you can eat even though you’re a spirit? The spirits on the outside don’t seem to ever eat.”

Lydia was relieved that the subject had changed and that Ruri wasn’t angry at her. *“Spirits don’t have physical bodies, so they cannot eat meals, yes. But we can eat if we can have a body, and for that we can just borrow someone else’s. As the Spirit of Time, I am a tad different from other spirits in that I can manifest*

a body without needing to get one from someone else. Of course, since I cannot leave this space, I can only do so in here. But, as long as I can manifest a body, I can indeed eat meals."

"Ah, I see. In that case, did you eat a lot with your prior contract-bearer?"

"Indeed. Eating is unnecessary for me since I am a spirit, but they would always bring something with them when they came to see me."

"Oh wow. Then, how about this? Next time, I'll buy a slice for you too, so just hold off on eating until I tell you which is yours."

"Deal. I really am sorry."

"It's water under the bridge. Oh, but that gives me an idea. Since I now know you're capable of eating, I'll bake some cookies tomorrow and we'll have a little tea party!"

"That sounds like so much fun. Can you really bake, Ruri?"

"Baking a cake is out of my league, but cookies I know I can do!"

And on that note, the night passed into the following morning, when Ruri was working diligently on baking cookies.

The spirits all clustered around her, brimming with interest as they watched her work. Even Kotaro came out of nowhere to watch from the kitchen window once she started working on her batch.

"What are ya making, Ruri?"

"Cookies. I'm going to have a tea party with Lydia."

"Wow, that sounds so nice~ We wanna have a tea party, too!"

"But none of you drink tea, right?" According to Lydia, they could eat as long as they had a physical body, but not a single spirit here had one. Even if they did have a tea party, they would just be watching her, which wouldn't be much fun at all. Ruri gave them all a wry smile.

"It's fine! It's the mood that counts." The spirits all told Ruri in unison that they'd find just observing fun, and Ruri gave in.

"Okay, then, how about I set up a chair and table out in the yard so you guys

and Kotaro can all join in?”

“Yay! Yippie!”

“Hooray!”

“Bmoooo!” The spirits weren’t the only ones giving a full body display of their joy; outside, Kotaro was belting out a pleased cry and wagging his scorpion tail around, mowing down the weeds around it.

“In any case, I’ll be having my tea party with Lydia today, so would all of you mind giving me a hand baking the cookies?”

“Uh-huh, sure!”

“I’ll knead the dough with wind!”

“I’ll put fire in the stove!”

After much excited clamoring, they finished baking the cookies.

Ruri placed the freshly baked cookies onto a plate, then took one of the extras and tossed it outside toward Kotaro, standing just outside the window, who nabbed it out of mid-air and scarfed it down.

She applauded Kotaro’s nice catch before divvying up the leftover cookies, placing one on a plate for Chelsie and placing another on the windowsill for Kotaro.

“Alright, all done. Next, to make the tea...” she said to herself as she poured hot water into the pot, placed the tea leaves in, and let it steep for a few minutes.

Ruri then placed the finished cookies, the teapot, and two teacups on a tray. She was ready to go see Lydia. Just then, the bottle containing Chelsie’s patented rancid medicinal tea, lying on the shelf in the kitchen, caught her eye.

Ruri stared the medicinal tea down before she grinned as an idea popped into her head. She flipped over one of the face-down teacups and poured the rancid medicinal tea into it.

Opening up the pocket in space like it was nothing, she entered to see Lydia already waiting for her.

"Welcome, Ruri."

"I baked you cookies, just like I promised."

"That's so great, it's been so many years since I've had cookies." Judging from how happily Lydia was smiling, she could tell that she had been looking forward to this tea party a great deal, making the effort she put into baking the cookies completely worthwhile.

She placed the tray on a nearby table and took a seat.

As Lydia manifested her solid form before taking a seat herself, her once transparent body turned clearly visible, and the wings on her back disappeared. She almost appeared human.

"Is that your manifested form, Lydia?"

"It is. Not much of a difference; it's just that my wings are gone and my body is more opaque." True to what Lydia described, her features hadn't changed in any other way, so there wasn't much of a shift between the two forms.

And she was still hearing Lydia's telepathic speech reverberate in her head, no different from when she was in spirit form.

"Even in a materialized form, you don't use your mouth to speak, huh?"

"I'm not incapable of doing so, but I find this to be the easier way to communicate; I've grown accustomed to it."

"Makes sense." Once Lydia had sat in her seat, Ruri set the cookie plate in the middle of the table and casually set the already-filled teacup in front of Lydia.

Then, she filled her teacup from the pot and set it in front of herself.

"Oh dear, our teas have different colors... Different scents as well..." The remark startled Ruri, but she hid it with a smile.

"I've made a special tea just for you, Lydia."

"Oh, did you? I am so grateful."

Seeing that Lydia was being so forthright and didn't suspect a thing despite being presented with the intense-smelling tea, Ruri breathed a sigh of relief. She then watched in suspense as Lydia picked up the teacup and brought it to

her mouth.

Lydia took a sip. Her hand stilled—and her face beamed with a frozen smile.

“T-This is delectable...”

“Huh...?” And then Lydia took another sip, much to Ruri’s astonishment.

Ruri had taken one sip and almost fainted out of sheer agony, but Lydia seemed completely fine. She was sure that she’d filled the cup with the rancid medicinal tea, but now she was second-guessing herself.

Upon closer inspection, she could see that Lydia’s hand was shivering ever so slightly and that her lips were slightly tensed up. It seemed that she had neither poured the wrong substance into the cup nor was there anything wrong with Lydia’s taste buds.

Lydia, oddly, kept pounding down the tea before Ruri quickly came in to stop her.

If she were to let her drink anymore, Lydia seemed likely to pass out.

“Lydia, you don’t need to force yourself to drink that. I know it doesn’t taste good.”

“No, it is good. Plus, this is tea that you made especially for me. I want to drink every last drop.” Ruri had planned this out as payback for Lydia eating her cake, but after seeing Lydia trying to brave the odds and drink the tea because Ruri had made it just for her, Ruri’s conscience became too loud for her to ignore.

“Lydia, I’m sorry!” she apologized, hands in front of her and bowing.

“Ruri?” Lydia said, dumbfounded as to why she was apologizing, but Ruri soon set things straight by confessing everything.

“A prank... I see, so it was a prank...”

“I really am sorry!” She couldn’t bear to lift her head, thinking that Lydia would be furious at her, but she was met with a delighted giggle, which brought her head up in surprise.

“Whether it’s you or the last one, I have to wonder why my contract-bearers so love their pranks.”

“By ‘the last one,’ do you mean your former contract-bearer?”

“Indeed. They were a fan of pranks as well and would bring all sorts of things here—like that chest that surprises you. ‘Jack in the Box,’ I believe? After it sprung out at me, they apologized in a similar fashion as you, Ruri,” Lydia said with a small smile, reminiscing on these things from yesteryear.

Once Ruri saw that face, she noticed that it was familiar. Whenever Lydia started talking about her former contract-bearer, she always got the same look on her face. A face of glee, pleasure, and sadness.

Something then popped into Ruri’s mind which she said aloud.

“Lydia, why did you make a contract with me?” Judging from Lydia’s behavior, she seemed to have been very attached to her previous contract-bearer, so it was hard to believe that she would be content with just anyone who managed to enter this pocket of space. It begged the question: why her?

Lydia ate one of Ruri’s cookies to wash the bad taste out of her mouth before somberly closing her eyes.

“They said it themselves. They said that, ‘one day a person who will make me smile shall appear.’ I had convinced myself that such a thing would never happen... But with you, Ruri, I think I could have fun once more.”

“I don’t think I’ve done anything particularly amusing...” Only a short amount of time had passed since Ruri had first met and contracted Lydia. They had only had some idle chit-chat, and she hadn’t necessarily done anything that would gain her favor.

“While being attracted to your mana is the greatest factor, you also were so concerned for me once you heard I was here all by myself. I knew that you were a kind-hearted person. And that you remind me a little of my previous contract-bearer. I was confident that we would get along just fine. That alone was reason enough for me to make a contract.”

“...So you’re having fun now?”

“Yes, every day is filled with so much joy now.” Lydia affirmed with a smile from ear to ear, filling Ruri with pleasure.

"...But I will not let you off the hook on this prank matter."

"Huh...?" That statement made Ruri's mouth straighten out in surprise.

"Didn't you just forgive me, though...?"

"I never said any such thing."

"But you were smiling like you had a good time."

"Those are two separate matters." Lydia pondered on what she should have Ruri do as an apology for her prank. After a few seconds, she pounded her fist into her palm as she lit upon a suitable idea.

"I've got it. I think I'll have you put on that cat-transformation bracelet from the other day."

"You want me to turn into a cat? Why that again?"

"Seeing as how I can't leave here, I have never before had the opportunity to touch such a living creature."

"Aah, I see now." Apparently, she'd had the opportunity to touch pelts and taxidermied animals, but she'd never had the chance to touch a living animal since they couldn't enter this space.

"Well, turning into a cat isn't too bad, I guess..." Since she pulled that prank, she couldn't refuse this relatively small wish. More importantly, she also couldn't resist Lydia's hopeful eyes gazing at her, so Ruri started looking around for the bracelet that should be somewhere in the room.

Lydia tapped on the table with one finger, instantly teleporting the bracelet Ruri was looking for onto it.

Seeing Ruri's clear and speechless surprise at that, Lydia went on to explain, *"It's like when you try to pull things from this pocket of space; if you need it, it will appear in front of you."*

"Wow..." Ruri replied in comprehension, picking up the bracelet and putting it on. In the blink of an eye, Ruri was transformed into a white cat, who descended from the chair and moved over to the space by Lydia's feet.

"Oh my, how adorable." Ruri came over to Lydia's legs, and Lydia gave Ruri a

pat on the head. Feeling the warmth of a living animal for the first time, the spirit's face was filled with adoration.

It seemed as though one pat wasn't enough, so she tried to see if it was all right for her to touch her a little more.

"Would it be okay if I held you in my arms?"

"Meooooow," Ruri said, trying to give her a reply, but the only thing to come out of her mouth was, naturally, cat sounds and not human speech.

That was when she realized that Lydia and herself wouldn't be able to understand one another now that she was a cat.

"Meoow, mrrrrr."

"What is it, Ruri?"

"Mrw, mrw, mrw, mrw."

"...Aah, now that you're a cat, you've lost the ability to speak, correct?"

"Meow." Although unable to speak, it seemed as though Ruri's point was getting through, which was a huge relief.

"In that case, you just need to use telepathic communication. It conveys whatever you wish to say in your mind using mana. It isn't terribly difficult to do. All you need to do is throw your mana and words to the recipient in a similar fashion as when you're using mana normally."

Just as she was instructed, she thought hard about conveying the words that popped into her head in a process very much like when she used magic.

"Ly... di... a... Can you... hear me?"

Upon hearing the voice resonating directly in her head and not her ears, Lydia's smile widened. *"Yes, loud and clear."*

"Ooh! I did it right!"

"You sure did. So may I hold you in my arms now?"

"Yeah, sure." There was still a little awkwardness to iron out in her telepathic speech, but she was able to convey her words well enough.

Lydia put her hands underneath Ruri's cat arms, picked her up, and placed her on her lap.

"Tee hee hee, cats are so fluffy and cute." Lydia was absolutely smitten over her first contact with a cat, petting Ruri's body and hugging her tightly in her arms.

"...Are you done yet, Lydia?"

"Just a little longer." She tried to signify the end since she was starting to get ticklish from all the touching, but Lydia wasn't willing to stop just yet.

Even though she said "a little longer," she ended up spending nearly an hour petting Ruri up and down. With that big, satisfied smile on Lydia's face, Ruri just couldn't find it in herself to tell her to stop. Especially not after hearing that this was her first contact with a live animal.

After this first experience, Lydia would continue requesting that she turn into a cat every now and then.



According to plan, the Prince of Nadasha and the classmates had exiled Ruri from the kingdom, snickering all the while. They kept this conspiracy secret from Asahi and instead told her that Ruri hated life in the castle and had run away. Although they thought she would simply accept that as the truth, they all underestimated Asahi's attachment to Ruri.

"Ruri-chan would never just leave me behind! I know Ruri-chan better than anyone!" If Ruri were there to hear her say that, she would probably interject profusely that that *was not* the case.

The Prince and the classmates were left confused in the face of Asahi's unexpected resistance.

She looked ready to fly out of the castle and look for Ruri herself at any moment, but the Prince calmed her down and sent a search party to the Mystic Forest on the day he exiled Ruri.

He thought that, with any luck, he could bring Ruri back *before* they tossed her into the forest, but when his team crossed paths with the Nadasha soldiers

on their way back, that was indication that they had already dumped Ruri off.

The Mystic Forest was a home to ferocious magic and non-magic beasts alike. Time was of the essence.

He called for reinforcements and searched the forest for a few days, but Ruri was nowhere to be found.

In actuality, the search party had almost come face to face with Ruri, but the spirits skillfully led them away so that they would never encounter her, and if they tried to go the same way as Ruri, she had an excellent backup in Kotaro, who would chase them off in the opposite direction. With all these contingencies in place, the party never once found her.

Asahi was losing her temper with each day that went by without Ruri, making the classmates, and the people of the Land of Nadasha, start to sweat.

Despite not being the figure he once was, the King was still sovereign of the land as a whole, and he decided to use this situation to his own advantage.

“It would seem that your friend has been abducted by those of the Nation of the Dragon King, Priestess Princess.” The King and Head Priest were positive that Ruri was no longer alive, but they made sure not to give that impression and put on sympathetic faces.

“Nation of the Dragon King?”

“Yes, the land where those savage demi-humans live. I am quite positive that envy over our nation having the Priestess Princess got the better of them and they captured the one person who is your weak point.”

“No way... I’m the reason Ruri-chan is...”

“Put your mind at ease. We shall not allow those savages to have their way forever. However, unfortunately, there are many people within our land who lack the backbone to send forth soldiers against the Nation of the Dragon King. If you, the bringer of prosperity to our lands, were to spearhead the initiative, then I have no doubt that even those now opposed to the idea would take up the call to arms. Will you not help us in order to save your friend?” The King continued with his sincere attitude, but in his gut he, of course, had absolutely no intention of saving Ruri. He was ready to blame the Nation of the Dragon

King once more, after they'd won the war, by saying that Ruri was killed in the course of the battle.

Asahi knew nothing of all of this, but their descriptions made the Nation of the Dragon King sound like a brutal and savage land. She willingly consented, confident that she simply had to save Ruri.

"Of course! We need to help Ruri-chan as quickly as possible... Just hold on, Ruri-chan."

And so, the Land of Nadasha prepared to go to war against the Nation of the Dragon King.

There were many in attendance who let out a sigh of exasperation upon hearing this conversation.

Chapter 10: Journey

Two years had flown by since Ruri had started living with Chelsie.

Chelsie taught her the ways of this world, and she continued to search for medicinal plants and fruits in the forest to sell at the marketplace, making her a familiar face around the city.

She went to Lydia's dimension to keep her company from time to time, helping her in sorting through the rooms slated to be erased. In her spare time she would test how far her control of spirits and magic went, and, of course, teach Kotaro tricks.

She had been living such a peaceful and positive life that she barely ever thought about Asahi or her classmates, if at all. But on one day, Chelsie brought up the subject.

"Ruri, have you been thinking about what your next moves might be?"

"Next moves?"

"It's been two years since you came here. You said that you wanted 'revenge,' or what have you, but I don't get that sense from you now. Also, don't you think it's about time that you figured out how you're going to lead your life here?"

This was a bit of a shock. She'd known this question was coming, but now that the time had finally come, Ruri was in an awkward spot.

She'd hoped to live in this tranquility for *just* a little while longer. But she decided to hide that, muttering under her breath, "But it's still not set in stone that I can't get back to my world..."

This too was one of her closely-held hopes. It was always possible that Chelsie just didn't know the way back, that there was someone out there who did. Ruri had been holding onto that dream.

"Then why aren't you doing anything? You haven't searched for a way back nor have you taken any action against Nadasha. Instead, it seems like you're

trying to spend the rest of your life here. Didn't you want to go back to your world?"

It did indeed seem that way. As Chelsie said, Ruri had spent the last two years not doing anything very exciting, but Ruri had enjoyed every minute of it. The thought crossed her mind now and then, but she had pretty much put revenge out of her head.

"Of course I'd like to go back. I have a family I miss, and I got snatched away just after I started attending the college they worked so hard to get me into. There is still so much that I have left to do."

"Then I don't think you should be spending all your time living in this forest if there's nothing here for you."

Ruri hung her head. After a short silence, she blurted out all the feelings she'd been keeping under lock and key.

"But... But if I were to find a way back to the other world, then Asahi would come back too, and my life would go right back to the same rut... I finally managed to get away, so why wouldn't I want to enjoy my life now a little longer?!"

Her desire to go back was a fact and there was no denying that. Ruri understood that, since Chelsie knew of no way to get back, she would eventually need to leave the forest and search for a way herself.

But even if she were to find it, the thought of her life going right back to the way it had been, to having Asahi around her every waking moment, was deeply depressing. Now that she was finally able to live free of her, it tore her up inside to just let that freedom go.

Not wanting to go back to living with Asahi was the biggest reason why Ruri was so hesitant to take her next steps. And if she were to find a way back to her world, and her life with Asahi started anew, she wanted to enjoy her life here in the forest to the fullest beforehand.

This said, the fact remained that part of her was refusing to make any progress because she was having such a lovely time. If Chelsie hadn't spoken up about it, she probably would have just kept putting it off.

“For crying out loud... From that grim look on your face I thought it’d be something serious... Then again, I suppose it is quite serious from your perspective,” Chelsie said, slightly exasperated.

“You really don’t want to have anything to do with this Asahi, do you?”

“Of course I don’t! I want to go home, but I don’t at the same time. I’m so conflicted!” Ruri exclaimed, pounding the table with her hands in a desperate attempt to get Chelsie to understand how she was feeling.

“Aah, okay, okay. Yes, I *do* see how you feel. But like I’ve said several times already, there’s no way for you to get back. It’s fine that you’re not ready to believe that, but I think you should be considering your options just in case you really can’t go back home.”

“Well, you have a point. I can’t keep putting you out, Chelsie-san.” She knew that she couldn’t depend on Chelsie’s goodwill forever.

“I don’t necessarily mind. I live out here by myself, so you being around makes the day-to-day much easier. I’m just worried about whether you should really be living out here in this forest. Then again, I shouldn’t be hiding a Beloved out here for much longer, either.”

“A Beloved?” Ruri repeated, cocking her head in confusion at the new piece of terminology.

“Simply put, it refers to someone *beloved* by the spirits, like you, Ruri. Under normal circumstances, it’s not uncommon for these individuals to be put under custody of the state. Since angering a Beloved means angering the spirits, and it’s unknown as to what kind of damage could come as a result of any given situation. Remember when your off-hand comment rendered all magic unusable in Nadasha? There have been Beloveds who took things to extremes, gotten angry enough to have entire nations destroyed. Since no one knows when or what could set that off, nations prefer to know their whereabouts.”

“When you put it like that, they sound like security risks that need special handling.”

“They are security risks, but they aren’t treated poorly. Doing so would anger the spirits as well, naturally, and the land flourishes wherever spirits gather.

They are handled with the utmost care, being so profitable. Not reporting you to the nation was my decision. I considered the fact that you're not of this world. So I figured I would wait until you're settled in and have a good grasp on how this world and the spirits in it function before asking what you planned on doing. I could have explained this to you on the day you came to this forest, but seeing as how afraid you were after being abandoned in a different world all on your own, I'm pretty sure you wouldn't have taken my explanation to heart anyway."

"Perhaps, yes." What Chelsie was saying was right. What with her being thrown into a state of total panic, on top of having been recently summoned to this strange world, if Chelsie were to have told her anything about "Beloveds" or "being put under special custody because spirits have to be managed carefully," it would have just made her terrified of everything and everyone in this new world. She never would have grown to trust Chelsie. In fact, she probably would have fled, thinking it was all a trap.

"Then, am I going to be put under state custody?" It wasn't very clear what kind of situation the term "custody" entailed, so Ruri shot a rather worried look at Chelsie.

"You needn't be afraid. As I just told you, you'll be treated with the utmost care. ...Actually, would you mind going on a little errand for me?"

"An errand to the city, you mean?"

"No, to the royal capital."

That made Ruri's eyes widen.

"My son just asked me to send him some medicinal plants, and I'd like you to take them to him. While you're out there, take the opportunity to look around the capital and experience life in the big city. Then, you can decide whether you should have the state take custody of you, or if you want to live as an ordinary person. You'll probably have better luck searching for a way home at the capital than here, anyway."

"You want me to run an errand to the royal capital, alone?"

"That's right. I'll tell my son to put you up. He's an aide to the King, so you can

trust in him.” Ruri was surprised to hear that he was someone of such high status, but what was really occupying Ruri’s thoughts was indecisiveness and worry over leaving her comfortable life and starting it anew elsewhere. She would be going to the royal capital, all alone, in this world where everything was still new and things didn’t work in the ways she was accustomed to. The thought of that was not only disheartening—it was frightening.

“...If I prefer life in the forest, then may I come back?” Ruri asked, gauging Chelsie’s reaction.

“Sure thing. You can come back home whenever you feel like it,” Chelsie replied with a kind smile, bringing relief to Ruri’s heart. After two years, this place truly had become her home, in this world at least. The fact that Chelsie said she could “come back home whenever” proved that even further, filling Ruri with quiet joy.

Now reassured that she had a place she could return to, she had the peace of mind needed to set out. And so, a few days later, with the requested plants and Chelsie’s letter to her son in hand, she parted ways with Chelsie temporarily.

“You have a safe trip.”

“Yes, ma’am~”

“Bmoo bmoooo!” Kotaro howled, bending his huge body nearly in half and nuzzling his snout against Ruri, clearly saying that he wanted to come, too.

“I’m sorry, but you’re just too big to take with me to the royal capital, Kotaro. It’ll cause a huge ruckus. I’ll make sure to come back home though, so in the meantime, help out Chelsie-san in my stead.”

“Bmooo!” Letting out a forlorn cry, Kotaro backed away from Ruri. After seeing him go to Chelsie’s side, Ruri flew into the sky.

“Okay, off I go!” Although she felt tendrils of unrest and sadness, Ruri gave a big farewell wave and headed off toward the royal capital.

Her flying skills were pretty shaky at first, but she had gotten used to it over the past two years. Nowadays, she was so accustomed to flying that when she went into town she would fly solo, without having to ride on Chelsie.

Ruri had gotten to the point where she could go quite fast, but the royal capital was still far away. It took her several days, including a handful of breaks in cities along the way, until she eventually reached it.

She wasn't in any particular rush, so the entire experience felt more like a leisure trip.

The capital was lined with Western European-styled buildings, and as she walked the stone-paved streets, she mostly just felt like she had traveled to a foreign country. If the people walking down the streets had all been in human form, then Ruri honestly would have mistaken it for a city in her own world, but every time she saw a person with animal ears, a tail, or some other beast or reptilian feature, she was sharply reminded that this wasn't the Earth she knew—like it or not.

The royal capital dwarfed the other cities that Ruri had seen here in terms of both population and scale. If she were to come to a place like this with spirits in tow, it would probably cause even more commotion than when she entered Chelsie's city for the first time. She instructed the spirits to come with her, but to keep their distance. That was met with more disapproval than she expected, leaving Ruri with no other choice but to wear a baggy robe and stuff whoever won rock-paper-scissors inside and out of sight.

She'd lent her wig to Kotaro, because he seemed so sad and lonely with her leaving, so she pulled the hood of her robe up over her head so that no one could see her hair.

Since living in the royal capital would be a costly endeavor, once Ruri reached the capital, she first focused on selling off some things for money.

She decided to sell an item of the many she'd inherited from Lydia's previous contract-bearer—a spear that Lydia had no attachment to and had given her blessing for her to sell. Not only had Ruri never used a weapon before, but, even if she had, this spear would be useless; it was far too big for Ruri to handle. Ruri was grateful she would be able to exchange it for cash.

She told the spirits to suppress their magical presence so that the demi-humans and their sharp senses wouldn't detect them. Then she entered the weapon shop, which Chelsie had described to her, and was greeted by an

elderly man with stubble.

“Welcome. How can I help you?”

“I have something I’d like to sell. Chelsie-san told me that this is a trustworthy shop.”

“Oh, you know Chelsie! Haven’t seen the old bird in a while, how’s she holding up?”

“Quite well. Fit as a fiddle, in fact.”

“Hah, that’s what I like to hear.”

Ruri quickly pulled the spear from her pocket and placed it on the counter. One look at the spear caused the shopkeep’s eyes to widen in clear surprise.

“Well, I’ll be damned... This is a spear from eons ago. But it’s in excellent condition, and the craftsmanship is top of the line. How did you find yourself with such an incredible piece of merchandise?”

She didn’t want to tell him the truth—that she’d entered into a contract with the Spirit of Time—so she stood there looking torn over what to say. The shopkeep saw this conflict in her and interpreted it in a way that made him nod his head in comprehension.

“Just a guess, but did you get this from a spirit’s mischief?”

“A spirit’s mischief?”

“It means one day suddenly finding an unfamiliar item in your pocket of space. It can happen with anything, from national treasures to pieces of garbage. That’s why legend states it’s some kind of spirit up to mischief.”

Hearing this, Ruri had a feeling that Lydia threw things from one room, slated to be erased, into other rooms. That would probably be reason enough to call it a “spirit’s mischief” in the outside world.

That Lydia, she’s probably been doing this for a long time...

“You’re a lucky one, li’l missy. I would love to have a run-in with a spirit’s mischief at least once in my life.”

“Ahaha...” It seemed the shopkeep had the wrong impression, so she

chuckled to play along.

“Still, kinda puts me in an awkward position. I’d love to buy this off of you since you’re the old bird’s acquaintance, but...”

“You won’t?”

“This spear would sell for a very high price. But I’m afraid I don’t have enough money to buy this spear off you lying around in this tiny shop of mine.”

And so, apparently out of the kindness of his heart, the shopkeep closed up shop surprisingly early and brought Ruri to a bigger shop.

“Hey, I’m here and I got something to sell ya!” The shopkeep said, with surprising intensity.

There was a back-and-forth between the merchant who wanted to buy it as cheaply as possible and the shopkeep who demanded a high price. In the end, the shopkeep pulled out his trump card. “Alright, then I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

That made the merchant fold, and they successfully sold the spear for enough money for one to indulge themselves in grand style for several years.

“And there ya have it. How’s that? Count on me and you get results!”

“T-Thank you so very much!”

With a smile of satisfaction, the shopkeep handed Ruri a pouch loaded to the brim with a massive amount of money.

Ruri considered that she would probably have taken a bum deal on her own, so she tried to give a portion to the shopkeep, but he refused, stating, “No need for that, li’l missy. This is something I did of my own accord.”

Ruri looked troubled, unsure of the right thing to do.

Upon seeing that, the shopkeep said, “Alright, just use that money to buy a bunch of stuff from my shop next time you visit.”

“Yes, sir. Consider it done.”

“Attagirl.”

Ruri made a deep, thankful bow and parted ways with the shopkeep... and

was almost immediately accosted by two tough-looking men.

“Yo, yo, li'l girly. Our wallets are pretty high 'n' dry.”

“Looks like you've got a boatload of cash on ya right now, eh? Why don'cha toss some coin our way?” They'd apparently overheard the conversation between the shopkeep and the merchant and saw that the money had passed to Ruri, and not the shopkeep, so they tailed her.

It was probably no surprise that negotiating over such a large sum of money was going to draw some attention.

The shopkeep, who knew how the royal capital worked, should have realized that their dealings would bring about this kind of danger, but he was unfortunately too wrapped up in the thrill of beating the merchant and it had completely slipped his mind.

Ruri tried to slowly step back and away from the leering thugs but found herself backed into an even less-populated corner of town.

(Oh boy, this might get ugly...) This was probably the first time she'd truly broken out in a cold sweat since Chelsie had taken her in, but she was also sweating for a different reason—the spirits were squirming around in her robe.

(Yikes, hold on a second!)

She quickly folded her arms around the spirits in an attempt to conceal their movements. Then, she looked behind the two thugs and exclaimed, “Oh!” The two hoodlums turned around, falling for the bait, hook, line, and sinker. With them distracted, Ruri sprinted at full-speed in the opposite direction.

“Ah! Wait, you dirty rat!”

“Who in the hell would wait for you guys?!” As she navigated the corners of the unpopulated stretch of street and made her getaway, some non-too-gentle words came from beneath her robe.

“Any enemy of Ruri's is an enemy of ours, right?”

“Let's put them out of commission.”

“Yeah, let's get 'em!”

“No means no, darn it!” Ruri panted, Chelsie’s warning flashing through her mind.

“The spirits are receptive to your emotions, so they might take drastic measures to defend you. The capital can get plenty dangerous, so you need to make sure to keep them in check so that never comes to pass.”

(I don’t think I can keep them in check, Chelsie-san!) It wasn’t just the spirits under her robe either. Thanks to her contract with Lydia, she was now able to sense the presence of all kinds of spirits, and she could feel a whole bunch of them rallying in her direction.

“Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap.” To further complicate the situation, this was Ruri’s first day in the capital and she was clueless as to the lay of the land. She had no idea where she was even running.

She had planned on going back to the main street packed with people, but she kept slipping into one dark back alley after another.

Meanwhile, her street-tough pursuers knew the town like the backs of their hands. Her game of tag with them was taking her body to its limits.

She was left with not much choice as she pulled out a baseball-sized orb from her pocket space and turned the corner. As soon as she did, she chucked the ball toward the alley in the direction of the two thugs chasing after her.

She closed her eyes and pinched her nose. Immediately, a blinding flash of light and a burst of acrid smoke exploded from the hoodlums’ alley.

She waited a bit before checking, and when she did she found the pair knocked out and an indescribable odor lingering in the air.

“Urk...” In the face of this stench, which surpassed even the odor of Chelsie’s rancid-tasting medicinal tea, Ruri wasn’t the only one wrenching her face away. It was clearly pretty unpleasant for the spirits as well, and she could feel the presences of all the spirits that had rallied to her aid dissipate all at once.

Underneath her robe, she could hear the spirits suffering from the smell. “Pee-yew!” and “I want to pass out, too,” among other complaints.

That orb, which Lydia gave her to protect herself in the capital, had cracked

open when she threw it, emitting a bright light and a foul odor in its wake. It seemed to take instant effects on demi-humans, what with their acute senses. However, it was proving too effective and was causing some immense distress to the user—Ruri, in this case.

“I’m gonna barf...” She regretted not putting up a barrier beforehand, but there was no use in crying over spilled milk.

Not wanting the stench to inconvenience the rest of the neighborhood, she quickly used some wind to blow it away, finally allowing her to breathe easy.

“I don’t *think* they’re dead. Uh, right...?” She didn’t think that smell would kill them, but the felled duo wasn’t budging an inch, which was concerning.

Just as she was looking into their faces to check if they were still alive, “Heh heh heh...” sounded a deep male chuckle from behind her, causing Ruri to quickly turn around.

He was decked in all black, and his face was covered. His eyes, visible through a slit in his face covering, were a deep greenish-blue color and shone strikingly.

Ruri felt like she was being drawn into the stranger’s eyes, but she snapped to her senses and focused on his body as a whole. That was when she noticed he had a long sword sheathed on his hip, painting him as a suspicious individual in almost any situation.

The suspicious man’s ominous aura made Ruri take a few steps back.

“Who are you?”

“It seemed like those thugs were chasing after you, so I followed. You’re not hurt, are you?”

Ruri had asked for the man’s identity, completely on guard, but his answer showed clear concern for her well-being, and upon hearing it, the obviously on-edge Ruri relaxed her guard slightly.

“You were trying to help me?”

“Yes, but my help clearly wasn’t necessary, as I can now see,” the man replied, glancing at the two men laid out at Ruri’s feet.

It wasn’t a very charitable thought to have toward someone who was so

willing to help you out of a sticky situation, but, in the back of Ruri's mind, she wished that he'd shown up a tad bit sooner.

If he had, then she wouldn't have needed to employ her nauseating final measure.

As she looked at the still unresponsive hoodlums, she even pitied their acute demi-human noses. This was a testament to how repulsive the stench in the alleyway was. She could feel it clinging to her nose hairs even now.

"...Exquisite."

"Uh, yeah, thanks." She was certain he was talking about her defeating the pair of hoodlums, but when the man, now standing in front of her, took a lock of her hair into his hand, she understood he was instead speaking about her hair.

Which is what made her realize, with a start, that her hood had slipped off during the escape and that her distinctive hair was out in the open for all to see.

The man ran his fingers through her tresses as if to test their texture, raising warning flags in Ruri's head.



Ruri got some distance from the man in order to shake off his fingers and once again pulled her hood firmly over her head.

This was not good—not good in the slightest.

The words “slave trade,” “abduction,” and “suspicious man before me” coursed through Ruri’s head, sending an instant wave of panic down upon her.

She had already been nearly assaulted once today and nothing guaranteed her that the man standing in front of her didn’t pose a similar threat.

They were in an unpopulated back alley and she was finding it understandably hard to trust someone covered from head to toe in black. Just because he *said* he was going to rescue her didn’t give him any real credit as a trustworthy person. Chelsie was no longer by her side, and her wariness was at an all-time high. It wasn’t as if slave traders would have “Slave Trader” written on their foreheads, after all.

She needed to get to somewhere populated as quickly as possible. That was Ruri’s only priority at the moment.

“What is your name?”

“I-I’m in a hurry, so if you’ll excuse me!”

“Oh, wait a...” She could hear the man call out from behind her, but she steadily ignored him.

Although she didn’t feel him chasing after her, Ruri made haste to get away from the suspicious man nonetheless.



Meanwhile, Chelsie, who had sent Ruri on her way, had written a letter for her son, Claus. Since she was using a magic item that sent things from one water-filled tray to another, it arrived well before Ruri herself.

The letter was extremely simple and to the point: She sent a person named “Ruri” to him on a task, so take care of her in the meantime. She didn’t write a single word about her being a Beloved. That was only written on the letter she had given Ruri.

Had she told him in advance, then he most likely would have gone to meet her in bombastic fashion, out of respect for her status as a Beloved.

If Ruri, who wasn't a fan of things being overblown in the first place, was greeted in such a way, she would undoubtedly feel uncomfortable and turn right around, back the way she came.

Beloveds didn't tend to stay long in the Nation of the Dragon King. It didn't matter if Chelsie did warn them; there were people who would either not listen or be far too conscientious over the arrival of a Beloved into their domain.

Since these were the circumstances, keeping it a secret up until the last moment was the best way to avoid raising any unnecessary concerns.

"I hope Ruri manages all right..." Having finished and sent her letter off to Claus, Chelsie breathed a sigh for the umpteenth time that day.

"I definitely should have accompanied her to Claus. That child seems to have her wits about her, but she's also a trifle lacking in some areas..." Chelsie said to herself, already regretting sending Ruri out on her own.

After two years of living with Ruri, she felt almost like her mother. All of Chelsie's children were boys. On top of that, the dragonkin possessed sturdy bodies from a young age, so it was normal to take a hands-off approach to their upbringing. However, Ruri, being a human, was weak—extraordinarily weak in comparison to a dragonkin. A little spill on the ground was enough to hurt her.

Chelsie had never had much interaction with humans in general, so when she saw Ruri's finger bleed from being poked by a tiny splinter jutting from a wooden door, she was positively astonished at how fragile she really was.

Other demi-humans didn't have the tough and robust bodies that dragonkin had, but they weren't nearly as delicate as humans. Thanks to that, she was always worried over when Ruri might get hurt, and she was on pins and needles that time the human girl had chased after the pickpocket in the city.

She felt more worry over Ruri than she had ever felt for her own offspring. Ruri had a lot of mana and many spirits by her side, but those factors only served to stir up her anxieties even more.

Chelsie truly hadn't wanted to kick Ruri out of the house. If Ruri wanted to

hold on to the slight sliver of hope that she would one day return back to her own world, then Chelsie should have just waited until she naturally came to her senses. A dragonkin's lifespan was long, and Ruri, with all of her mana, would live much longer than a regular human being. She would have all the time in the world to sort through her feelings.

However, Chelsie had decided that she needed to let her meet the Dragon King as soon as possible, all because of the reports she'd received from her grandson, Joshua, who had been gathering intel in Nadasha. These reports told of the Priestess Princess, summoned to Nadasha, searching for her friend only to find that said friend had been abducted by the Nation of the Dragon King, much to her dismay. In reality, Nadasha was covering up the truth in an attempt to use the Priestess Princess' influence to further their own interests. His report this time around detailed that Nadasha was using the Priestess Princess' willingness to save her friend to incite a war against the Nation of the Dragon King.

"Those damn Nadashians never learn... I don't know if this Asahi girl is simple, or just plain stupid, but she's probably been spoiled for so long that she doesn't even care as long as what's going on isn't to *her* disadvantage." She seemed to either be blind to what went on around her or simply had a tendency to believe whatever was most comfortable for her.

After all, logically speaking, if your friend just up and disappeared, your first and biggest suspects should be the people of the country she'd disappeared *from*. According to her grandson's reports, the girl was averse to studying, not willing to learn much about Nadasha, the country she resided in, much less the Nation of the Dragon King. Given that, she had no business assuming that the Nation of the Dragon King was the culprit. For Chelsie, a citizen of that nation, it angered her to no end.

From Chelsie's perspective as someone who knew the truth, this whole thing was a farce.

To put it lightly, Asahi was pure enough to take what she was given without objections, which made her the perfect puppet for a country like Nadasha.

Chelsie hadn't informed Ruri of all this—not yet. Reason being, she was afraid

of the news sending Ruri off the handle and making her head off to Nadasha to launch a protest. Chelsie naturally wanted to avoid a situation where Ruri's emotions might cause the spirits to spiral out of control. But the Dragon King's not knowing of a Beloved, in the off-chance that the spirits did go berserk, would be a problem. Ruri was at the root of this matter. Since she was undoubtedly going to be involved in this one way or another, Chelsie sent Ruri off to the royal capital so that the Dragon King could preemptively deal with these issues.

But would the Dragon King alone be able to stop all of this? That was the real question...

"Maybe I should go to check on her once in a while, just to be sure..." Chelsie was wrought with indecision.

Chapter 11: The Dragon King

The geography of this world Ruri had been summoned to consisted of a single continent and several islands of varying sizes.

Ruri was currently on the continent, which housed a great number of nations, but there were four among them that were larger than the rest.

One was the Nation of the Dragon King, ruled by dragon demi-humans. One was the Nation of the Beast King, ruled by lion demi-humans. One the Nation of the Spirit King, ruled by Qilins. And last but not least, the mightiest nation of them all, The Imperial Nation, ruled by man.

It was abundantly clear that if these four nations were to go to war, then the continent would be thrown into turmoil. That was why, long ago, an alliance was formed to ensure no such war would ever happen.

The Nation of the Dragon King was a member of that alliance. Nowadays, demi-humans and humans lived there regardless of race, but long ago, it was a nation centered around the dragonkin, who freed other demi-humans enslaved by man.

Demi-humans trumped regular humans in terms of mana and prowess, but they lived in small settlements of their own race and didn't needlessly involve themselves with tribes outside their own. Closed societies as they were, they went on with their lives, minding the traditions of their own culture. That ended up spelling their disaster.

No matter how capable they were individually, they were vastly outnumbered by the humans and stood no chance. Some were killed, some were enslaved, and some chose to take their own lives as opposed to a life in shackles.

The subset of those who managed to survive and escape sought sanctuary from the dragonkin, the wisest and most powerful tribe in the world. The leader of the dragonkin at the time was angered by the wrongdoings of these impudent humans and freed the slaves to establish a nation to take in and

protect the victims.

Thus the dragonkin leader became the nation's first king. He accepted a wide variety of individuals—demi-humans and humans alike—who were seeking asylum and gave them a place to call their own. Hence why the Nation of the Dragon King in present day was a melting pot of different tribes.

For generations, the nation was ruled by its king, who was the strongest dragonkin among them all. At present, the current Dragon King, whose great power gave him the right to the throne at quite a young age, was of marriageable age. While frequently approached about marriage, not only from his own nation but from other nations as well, the idea wasn't appealing to him in the slightest and he continued to be a royal bachelor.

Though he ascended the throne at a young age, his ability as a ruler was unimpeachable and he was held in high esteem by his court. He was a diligent worker with a calm personality. He was a capable young leader that was quite naturally thought of as extremely eligible, but it seemed that he personally just wasn't interested in marriage. The Dragon King's mind wasn't focused on women, much to the distress of those around him. They all wanted him to hurry up and pick his queen.

One of the advisors to said king was Chelsie's son, Claus. He was a man with an intellectual and mild-mannered demeanor—the polar opposite of his mother, who made her rather curmudgeonly attitude clear quickly to all who met her.

He entered the royal office with documents to present to the King. His eyes were greeted by the King's desk, buried under papers courtesy of the elder members of his court—it was today's batch of marriage candidates' portraits scrupulously selected from all those sent from both within and without the country.

"Another day, another stack, I see," Claus commented with a wry smile. One of the several elderly vassals in a rush to pile the King's desk with pictures responded with a look of satisfaction on his face.

"We need to have His Majesty actually *look* at the candidates this time around. And with this many, there has to be at least one person who measures

up to his tastes.”

Claus wished they would just give it up already but kept that to himself. The older vassals, motivated to find the King a mate “this time,” had buried the King’s work desk in girls’ portraits.

After the stacking was finished, the elder vassals’ eyes darted around in search of the king, who was nowhere in sight.

“...By the way, where might His Majesty be?”

“His Majesty has stepped out into town.”

“Egads, again? I hope this time he at least manages to fall in love out there and brings back a suitable wife.”

“Yes, well... that is quite the tall order.”

The King ventured out into the town on the grounds that it served as a sort of extension to his political duties—saying he liked to survey the landscape of the capital with his own eyes.

He was a fine king that gave careful consideration to his citizens. It was hard for Claus to imagine this ruler, who had a tendency to be too absorbed in his work, would let love hijack his emotions in the middle of business.

“His Majesty should take after the Beast King. Why, I heard that just last month he wed his nineteenth wife!”

“I’m inclined to believe that might be too many in the first place...”

“Fair point. We have to send wedding gifts each time he gains a new wife; he should try walking a mile in our shoes for once. Not only is it costly but the financial and foreign affairs people complain that they need to prepare a distinct and original gift for each new wife.”

The door silently opened in the middle of their conversation, and a man dressed entirely in black entered. His greenish-blue eyes were the only things visible through his hood. He removed it, revealing ebony hair and graceful features.

Claus and the elder advisors promptly saluted.

“Welcome back, Your Majesty.”

“Quite,” the Dragon King said with a curt nod. As soon as he saw the top of his work desk occupied entirely by portraits of women, he grimaced.

“What is all of *that*?”

“Naturally, they are pictures of your marriage candidates. You should look through them to see if any meet with your approval, and you needn’t pick just one—you may select as many as you’d like. In terms of pedigree, appearance, and mana, any of these girls would be perfectly suited to become your queen.”

Glancing at the elder vassals, their hearts filled with hope, the Dragon King silently stood before his desk and held his hand out toward the portraits.

As soon as he did, the stack of portraits atop his desk went up in flame. Then they turned to ash and blew sadly away out the window.

“Aaaah! What are you doing, Your Majesty?! The girls we painstakingly selected for you!”

“No! All of our hard woook!”

“I said I didn’t need it, did I not? The Dragon King is chosen for their *strength*, not their lineage, so there’s no need to go through such ridiculous efforts to find me a breeding partner.”

“Even so, it’s a fact that powerful individuals bear powerful children! If you are so opposed to the idea, just bring anybody back; it doesn’t matter who! I bet you *still* can’t think of anyone, anyway!”

“...”

The elders underestimated the Dragon King, assuming he wouldn’t have anyone in mind, but the Dragon King made no response, causing their eyes to widen. Even Claus, who was watching all this from the sidelines, gasped.

“...Could it be that you *do* have someone in mind, Your Majesty?”

“...No one I would take as a partner, per se. Just someone that I’d like the chance to talk to a little more.” While he didn’t exactly affirm the elders’ suspicions, they now knew that he had someone he thought of romantically. This news was enough to bring joy to their faces and raise their blood pressures

in anticipation.

“Zounds! This is wonderful news! Where might they be now?!”

“What tribe are they?”

“How strong is their mana?”

“Well?!”

“Everyone, I implore you to remain calm...” Claus was concerned over the elder dragons getting too excited for their own good, but they shot him a look with their crazy eyes.

“How can you expect us to remain calm?! Who are they? Where are they?”

“No clue.”

“...Pardon?”

“Like I said, I have no clue,” the Dragon King reiterated, going on to explain the incident that had occurred in the back alley of the royal capital. He told them about the girl getting chased by a couple of thugs. How he was planning to save her until she defeated them both before he even got there.

“We exchanged a few words, but I didn’t learn her name. I only know that she has lovely platinum-blond hair...” said the Dragon King, looking at the hand that had touched the hair of the girl in the alley—as if recalling its silky smooth sensation on his fingertips.

“Oh-ho, that coloring is quite rare. Quite impressive, Your Majesty.” With a hunch and a sly smile, the elders turned around and pointed straight at Claus.

“All right, Claus. Deploy all soldiers immediately to search for this platinum-blond girl and have her subdued... I mean, bring her back to the castle in a *subdued* manner! We must not show any disrespect for our future queen!”

“Do not let her escape by any means!”

“Wait, wait, wait, I never said that I was interested in her as a member of the opposite sex,” the Dragon King replied, flustered. The elderly vassals were speaking as if they were going to welcome her as his bride right away.

“Oh, come now. Finding attraction after sharing only a few words means that

you felt something real for that girl, does it not? That is how dragonkin operate, after all. Why, it takes me back to the good old days.”

“Yes, me as well.”

The Dragon King racked his brain, faced with them speaking as if everything was set in stone. “Please, this isn’t a matter to employ the soldiers for.”

He had only a passing interest in this girl, and if word were to get out that he had used soldiers just to track down a woman, he was positive that everyone would look at him in a, let’s say, less than impressed light. He would be so embarrassed that he wouldn’t be able to go out in public.

Picking up on his liege’s train of thought, Claus stepped in to assist him. “I suggest we recall Joshua. We do not need any more intel gathered in Nadasha, after all. Since the girl in question has distinctive coloring, he can scout her out right away; soldiers won’t even be necessary.”

“You do have a good point there.” That suggestion seemed to sit well with them, and the Dragon King breathed a heavy sigh in relief.

“...A good point, but we’d be in a predicament if she were to abscond on us in the meantime.”

“Perhaps we should go in search of her as well?”

“All right, we’ll strike while the iron is hot!” The group pumped their fists into the air with a rousing cry and scurried out of the office, leaving Claus to stand with a wry grin as the Dragon King breathed yet another sigh—a sigh filled with weariness.

Chapter 12: The Home Visit

After defeating the pair of street toughs and then running away from the suspicious man in black, Ruri gave up on going to Chelsie's son's house for the day and decided to retire at an inn. Arriving at the inn and getting to her room, she took off her robe and plopped into bed.

"Aah... I'm beat." Spending the day running through the city at top speed made her legs feel like lead now.

"Rest well, Ruri."

"You did your best today."

Comforted by the spirits' teensy hands patting her gently on the head, she quickly drifted off to sleep.

The following day, Ruri was ready to find Chelsie's son—a man named Claus.

She grabbed breakfast at the inn, checked out, and left. Chelsie had given her a map leading to Claus' house, so she pulled it out of her pocket space.

Just as she began making steady progress toward Claus' house, asking passers-by for directions when she started to get lost, a stroke of bad luck caused her to run into the same two men from the day before.

Just like the city back near Chelsie's, she would eventually be familiar with nearly everyone given enough time. Unfortunately, that time was not now. The fact that she'd run into the same duo today, amidst this slew of people in the capital, was beyond a coincidence.

Ruri froze up and grimaced, drawing their attention.

"Grk!"

"Heheh. Well, fancy bumpin' into you, li'l missy."

"Y'know, you sure got one over on us yesterday."

The pair flashed wicked smiles her way, and it wasn't long before they were dashing at Ruri with demonic expressions as if saying they wanted payback for the other day. Ruri reactively made a break in the opposite direction.

She got the occasional grumbled complaint from the people she bumped into along the way, and she howled back an apology every time. Though the day had only just begun, she was again running through the capital at top speed.

Although she found herself in the exact same predicament as yesterday, in direct contrast to her heavy breathing, her mind was surprisingly calm.

Ruri purposely went down an alley with few people in it. A single, straight strip of wall, a dead end, was waiting at the end. Ruri's pursuers knew this and started chuckling in triumph in their minds, but Ruri turned the corner anyway. The men followed her around the bend, but once they did—Ruri was gone.

"What the? Where the hell did she go?!"

"We were right behind her, so there's no way we lost her! Get lookin'!"

The men continued to barrel down the straight alley.

Watching the pair run off was a pair of lapis lazuli eyes from behind a small crate.

(Crap, crap.) The second she'd turned the corner, Ruri had put on that mysterious bracelet to transform into a white cat and shrink behind some cover. She waited for their voices to leave before coming out, jumping on the crate, and licking down her forearm like any other cat.

It was said that demi-humans and humans had slightly different scents, distinct enough for demi-humans to clearly differentiate between the two. That was why those two demi-humans were able to distinguish Ruri as a human from the moment they met her. Taking this into account, Ruri concealed the bracelet in her clothes for easy access.

Neither of them would suspect that the human they were after was now the cat sitting on a crate.

The bracelet was enchanted with concealment magic that would even keep wolfkin, the race said to boast the keenest sense of smell, from detecting it. It

not only changed her physical form into that of a cat but her scent as well. That was an aspect where you really felt the depth of the maker's obsession, but it was thanks to that obsessive level of feline love, that thought to factor in changing body odor, that Ruri was able to protect herself.

It was a strategy that she'd hashed out just in case she was chased again, but she had to break it out earlier than she expected.

(I might run into them again, so maybe I should walk around the capital in cat form as much as possible.)

Ruri headed to Claus' house while remaining in the guise of a cat. Since she wasn't able to hide the spirits under her robe in that form, she had them follow her a short distance away.

When she reached Claus' house, it wasn't the normal civilian house she'd envisioned but a stately manor.

It had a sturdy gate, and she could see an entryway off in the distance, but it was hard to get the whole picture from a glance.

Just how much space did this place take up?

Chelsie's house in the forest wasn't small, but her lifestyle was secluded and mostly self-sufficient, so it blew her away that her son lived like this.

What surprised her even more, however, was that in front of the thick gates was a tiger. Yes—a tiger. It was no mistake; it was definitely a tiger. The beast possessed a huge frame, was covered in striped fur, possessed ferocious feline eyes, and had paws so meaty that one swipe would be enough to send you to the pearly gates.

However, unlike a normal tiger, it was wearing clothes and standing upright like a person.

If Ruri didn't know that beast people, sans a handful of sects, were relatively mild-mannered individuals, she would have turned right around and hightailed it out of there.

The tiger glaring at her in front of the gate seemed to be on guard duty. Despite understanding that she was expected, the tiger still intimidated her

more and more the closer she got. She recalled her current form and pondered over what she should do.

Ruri had finally realized that she couldn't turn back to normal.

Although she was fine with having turned into a cat for the moment, she needed to remove the bracelet fit snugly around her wrist in order to revert to normal, which didn't seem at all possible, what with her cat paws.

The spirits could touch mana as well as people and things with mana in the natural world, but she couldn't very well ask them to take this off her right in the middle of the street. The spirits would happily accept any request Ruri would ask of them, so if she were to ask one of them for help, she'd wouldn't get just one—she would get a gaggle all rushing her at once.

Asking the tiger in front of her to remove the bracelet was always an option, but Ruri wasn't very keen on that idea—at all. Her teensy-weensy, frail kitty arm was slenderer than the tiger's fingers. She had no confidence whatsoever in holding it out when faced with those boulder-crushingly massive, ripped arms and beefy palms.

He would definitely snap the bracelet—and her arm—with ease...

She considered putting returning to human form on the backburner. She could easily communicate with telepathy, but it didn't seem likely that the lord of the estate would meet with someone disguised as a cat.

(Yeah, I'd bet anything that he wouldn't see me. A talking cat... Well, then again, there are cat demi-humans, so maybe a talking cat wouldn't be too extraordinary.) As Ruri considered that thought, the spirits started to get impatient over Ruri not budging an inch toward her destination despite it being right in front of her, so they began to approach her.

Likely realizing that coming to her as a group was ill-advised, one spirit came as a representative.

"Ruri, aren'cha going in~?"

"I am. I'm just doing a little thinking beforehand. So hey, about the bracelet, what if... Ah, someone's coming out." The spirit had come forward at just the right time, so she considered having them take off the bracelet, but that was

when a well-groomed gentleman stepped out from the gate.

As soon as he did, the presumed guardsman tiger greeted him with a cordial bow.

Though she wasn't certain that he was the lord of the estate, he was unmistakably at least a resident of this house. The gentleman in question had straight, vermillion hair and reddish brown eyes and looked to be in his thirties. He had an intelligent demeanor. Considering demi-humans had appearances that didn't match their ages, he could be much younger or older than she thought, which made it very hard to actually know.

The second Ruri saw him, she knew that he was Chelsie's son, which didn't make much sense since his features weren't at all similar to hers. As she looked at him, perplexed as to why she'd had that thought, the man noticed her staring at him and walked toward her. However, he seemed less interested in Ruri and more so the spirit that was hanging by her side. His gaze stayed on the spirit the entire time.

"A spirit with a cat is quite the uncommon combination. What might you be doing around here?" he asked, directing his question toward the spirit and not Ruri, so Ruri interjected.

"Oh, the little one isn't the one who wants to talk. That'd be me."

The man's eyes widened a bit, startled that a cat was communicating with him via telepathy, but a gentle smile soon formed on his face and he squatted down in an attempt to bring himself as close to eye level as possible. He spoke to Ruri in a gentle manner, as if speaking to a young child.

Though the act of a cat communicating in words was uncommon, it apparently wasn't too earth-shattering of an event in this world.

"And how can I help you?"

"Are you Chelsie-san's son, Claus-san? My name is Ruri. I've come to see you on an errand from her."

"Yes, I'd be Claus, but you're *her*, eh? Well, my mother did tell me about running an errand, if I remember, but..." Claus looked at Ruri in suspicion, a doubtful look on his face.

In order to show Claus that she was telling the truth, she opened her pocket above Claus' head, and from it dropped the letter Chelsie had written her son. Claus caught it, took a look at the handwriting and voiced his approval.

"This indeed appears to be my mother's handwriting. I apologize for my rudeness. You are more than welcome here. Please, come inside." Ruri wanted him to remove the bracelet before any of that, but she lost her chance to say anything, so she went along with it, entering his huge mansion behind him while still in cat form.

Ruri walked into the new room, at a loss as to where to sit until Claus offered the sofa. She hopped on and parked herself right in the middle of the huge couch.

Right after, a servant entered, placing a saucer of milk on the table in front of Ruri, making Ruri feel a way that was—hard to explain.

She was starting to regret not turning back into a human sooner.

Meanwhile, Claus was skimming through the letter from Chelsie that Ruri was holding on to.

At first, Ruri thought it was just her imagination, but she was pretty sure that the further Claus read through the letter, the deeper his brow furrowed.

He took his time reading it then rubbed at his temple, let out a deep sigh, and faced Ruri once more.

"I have a few questions for you. Would you mind?"

"By all means, go ahead."

"How long have you known Mother for?"

"About two years, give or take."

He then proceeded to ask a few more questions, all of which Ruri answered. The majority were questions about her life in the forest and how Chelsie was doing. In the middle of this, Ruri handed him the medicinal plants that Chelsie had asked her to deliver.

"Last question: Mother's letter said that you have enough mana to be beloved by the spirits, but I see that you only have one around at the moment. Care to

explain?”

“I’m keeping them all at a distance for the moment. They might cause a public uproar otherwise. I can always summon them if necessary. Shall I?”

The spirits—minus the one with Ruri—were currently holding their far-off positions, but she could feel them waiting outside the window, eagerly anticipating being called upon. Claus seemed intrigued and granted her permission. Once Ruri told the spirits they were allowed to come in, they flooded the room, one after another.

The sight of the large army of spirits suddenly filling up the entire room made Claus wrench himself backward and scrunch up his face. The number of spirits actually exceeded even her expectations, and she too found herself grimacing, which translated to twitching her cat whiskers. In addition to the spirits that had come with her from the forest, there were spirits from the capital who were curious to see what was going on. The room quickly became extremely busy.

“Wowie, this is Ruri? Nice to meet you.”

“She’s a white kitty cat!”

“She’s tinier than what they said, ain’t she?”

“Her mana feels really comfy.”

And because they were all talking over one another, it was also quite noisy. Making this even worse was that they were all talking directly into her brain via telepathy. Their voices were forced directly into her head; shutting her ears would be completely useless.

Ruri desperately tried to cover her ears with her paws anyway, and, sitting across from her, Claus suffered similarly with his hands over his ears as well. Though they knew it was futile, the reflex was as natural as breathing.

“Everyone, stop! Stoop! My head is gonna split opeeeen!” After a few tries, she finally got the spirits to quell themselves. Fearing a repeat performance, she kindly asked the spirits, other than the ones who followed her from the forest, to leave the room.

Catching their breath, Ruri and Claus slumped in their seats. Soon after, they resumed their conversation.

“You do indeed appear to be a Beloved—one adored by the spirits,” Claus said, finally accepting this fact. He then, however, seemed to ponder something for a moment before delivering some news with a serious expression on his face. “In that case, I cannot have you stay here.”

Claus’ unfortunate statement caused Ruri, whose plans revolved around staying in his home, to immediately shoot a startled question back at him.

“Huh?! But why?!” Ruri exclaimed, assuming that the torturous clamor of the spirits was to blame.

However, that wasn’t precisely the factor that Claus perceived as dangerous. As he explained, “Mother might have informed you, but your existence is extremely valuable. To both the Nation of the Dragon King and other nations alike. This place is severely lacking in security, meaning you need someplace that *does* have more apt security. And the most secure place I can think of is the castle.”

“No, really, don’t you think you’re blowing this out of proportion...?” Of all the places he could have suggested, he picked the castle. ...Where the Dragon King resided.

Ruri thought that just being in this mansion made her feel awkward enough, so there was no way that she could comfortably live in some royal palace.

“No, I think the proportion in this case is exactly right. We *must* assure that no harm of any kind befalls you,” Claus said, “so I will go to the castle and request His Majesty’s approval. I will return shortly, so, please, do not leave this room under any circumstances.” He walked briskly out of the room, without giving Ruri a chance to reply.

“Oh, before that, this bracelet needs to come...” Ruri started, but the rest of her sentence was drowned out by the hard slam of the door as Claus left.

What should I do...?



Lydia, the entity that lived in the space of time that no one other than Ruri could visit, was sorting through the pocket spaces that were now owner-less.

"I don't think I have a use for this. But... maybe Ruri might?" Lydia pondered to herself, holding a mysterious vase in one hand.

In this place, the terms "respect for the dead" and "restraint" didn't exist.

The last words Lydia's former contract-bearer had said to her were that when a room is slated to be erased, she should take anything useful from it.

Lydia sorted each item into wanted and unwanted piles, sending the ones that Ruri might be able to use off to her pocket space. She would then take the useless items and erase them along with the room they were in. Any item that seemed like it could be useful, but that neither herself nor Ruri had a use for, would go someplace different.

Lydia took the mysterious vase, opened the door to the neighboring room, tossed the vase inside, and shut the door. Thus, an artifact that would have been lost to the sands of time lived to see another day.

Once this room check was finished, she stood in front of the door and held out her hand. She made the door dissolve into the darkness, erasing it completely and leaving a wall so blank that anyone would think there had never been a door there at all.

Lydia stopped suddenly. The spirits from the outside world had news for her.

Spirits had a unique communication ability between one another, so Lydia was able to pick up information from the outside despite not being able to leave the dimension. But since it wasn't worth her time (and depressing besides) to take in every little piece of information from all spirits worldwide, she only paid attention to the pertinent bits. She usually kept the connection cut off when it wasn't necessary, but ever since she'd made her contract with Ruri, she got updates from the spirits near Ruri on a regular basis.

These were the spirits who had reached out to her.

"It seems Ruri reached the royal capital. And it also seems she met with the person she needed to meet safely. ...Still, I wonder if she'll be all right." She was confident that the dragonkin wouldn't try anything foolish against Ruri since,

unlike humans, they fully comprehended the chaos the spirits could unleash if provoked. That being said, every nation and every race had its fair share of fools. And if said fool was a statesman, then they might try to manipulate her to suit their interests.

Lydia was sure that Ruri understood the chance of that happening, but from her perspective, Ruri seemed to lack a proper sense of caution. Unless something changed, Ruri was bound to be bent to *someone's* will, sooner or later.

"Looks like I need to keep things in check, just in case," said Lydia with a self-satisfied chuckle, telling something to the spirits on the outside.

Chapter 13: The Beloved

—I will be sending a child named “Ruri” over to you soon, so look after her for the time being.—

That was the entirety of the letter Claus had received a few days before Ruri’s visit. It was completely devoid of any further details or explanation.

As soon as she’d determined that her sons could live on their own, his mother had wasted no time in giving them her house and going to live out her golden years in the forest.

From the perspective of the other races, the dragonkin seemed remarkably hands-off in their approach to rearing their children. But even among her people, Chelsie was considered to be a distant parent. She’d left her kids especially early and, yet, still failed to compliment them for turning out to be upstanding men with steady jobs in the royal palace—something that Claus and his brothers had expressed their displeasure about to her on more than one occasion. She always replied, “Of course you’d all end up fine. No way any children of mine and your dad’s would end up weak.” She seemed to be sincere in this belief, which left them all speechless.

They probably *would* have strayed from the path of righteousness if they hadn’t felt any motherly love at all, but she was always clear on that point, and her love was never in question. She had always been a tad eccentric, and reached out to them like clockwork, so Claus and his brothers decided to simply accept the lack of praise as part of her personality and shelved the matter.

Knowing how she was, receiving mail from her outside of her usual schedule was almost alarming. And this was the letter he received, a single-line.

Claus searched his memory, but he had no recollection of any person named “Ruri.” It was probably someone she became acquainted with after moving to the forest, but he didn’t put any more thought into it, only noting that it was unusual for his mother to ask him for a favor.

Several days after, while walking out his front gate to head to the castle, he was met by a beautiful white cat and a spirit. Claus found himself surprised by this odd combination, but the tidal wave of surprise hardly ended there.

From his mother's letter he had assumed that this "Ruri" would be a person, so he was quite taken aback. Then, in the letter that Ruri delivered to him, it was explained that the cat before him was indeed running an errand for his mother. And there was something else that he could hardly overlook... no, a paragraph that was of *vital* importance.

—The errand-runner, Ruri, is a Beloved. *Don't let her suffer even a single scratch. Ruri knows almost nothing about Beloveds or this world, so make sure to take her under your wing and teach her.*—

A Beloved...

The word sent a shiver down Claus' spine.

At the moment, he only saw a single spirit with her. If she were one truly adored by the spirits, then he would have expected her to arrive with two or three in tow. Just one spirit wasn't enough to call her a "Beloved."

But when he investigated further, she assembled more spirits than he had ever seen in one place in his life.

He couldn't believe his mother would unload such a person onto him—that complaint continued to echo through his mind. Realizing that this situation was too much for him, Claus acted fast. He gave strict instructions to his servants not to go near the room that Ruri was in and rushed to the castle at record speed.

The normally calm and collected Claus was now in a previously-inconceivable rush and violently opened the door to the royal office. The Dragon King and his aides, most with documents for him to sign in hand, stared at him in wide-eyed surprise.

"I humbly request that you clear the room, Your Majesty." Those were the first words out of Claus' mouth. The Dragon King furrowed his brow, but he didn't waste time asking questions and cleared the room outside of a handful of trusted aides.

“Now what the devil is going on, Claus? You’re not acting like yourself.”

“A Beloved has emerged, sir.”

At first, no one understood what he meant by “Beloved,” but after a short pause, their eyes widened.

“W-What did you say...?”

“Is that really true?!”

The Dragon King appeared calm, but his voice was trembling slightly. The aide that had spoken up after him was leaning over, face brimming with excitement—almost as if he might grab the King by his lapels at any moment. While there was a clear difference in their outward demeanors, both of them were astonished beyond comprehension—as was everyone else, naturally.

A Beloved—a person who was preferentially cared for by the spirits. It was said that the very first Dragon King had been a Beloved.

Beloveds brought about blessings but, at the same time, strife and chaos. Spirits gathered around their Beloveds, and those spirits’ powers made the soil rich and fertile. In this land, being favored and protected by the spirits essentially meant having control over the world. Nations and influential people, plotting to gain these Beloveds for themselves, led to conflict and bloodshed on much more than one occasion. In addition, the Beloveds in those conflicts were sometimes hurt, causing the spirits to give in to their anger and rain down punishment.

Several conflicts of that nature persisted until the alliance of the four nations agreed that the Beloveds themselves would choose where they would stay. This policy, determined by the four most powerful nations in the world, was soon adopted by most other nations as well.

That being said, those who wished to use the powers of Beloveds for themselves were by no means gone. It was standard practice that if a nation found a Beloved, they needed to quickly take them under their care before any other nation could intervene.

“Your Majesty, we need to take them into our custody post haste! What race are they?!”

“...A cat.”

“What, a catkin, you say?” The catkin weren’t known for their great mana among demi-humans, and there were scant few examples of catkin Beloveds emerging, so the aides were slightly disheartened. Reason being that there were variations between the abilities of Beloveds from different races. Race determined how much of their mana was attractive to the spirits and how much of a spirit’s cooperation they could obtain. If they didn’t have a large amount of mana, then they weren’t going to be able to utilize strong spells. And since catkin had small mana reserves, the aides were disappointed. This Beloved might not be able to handle the power of the spirits. Nevertheless, the fact of the spirits gathering was a blessing in and of itself, and those despondent feelings fell by the wayside almost as soon as they were felt.

However, Claus corrected their misconception in a hesitant tone.

“Um... no, actually, not a *catkin*. A cat. Just... a cat.”

“...A cat? Not a catkin?”

“Correct.”

“And you’re positive about that?” The Dragon King repeated this question in place of the shocked speechless aide. Claus nodded solemnly.

“Yes, they only have one tail.” The thing that separated a catkin from a normal cat was the number of tails. Unlike normal cats with their one tail, catkins normally possessed two tails or more.

“Though, I wouldn’t say that they are a *normal* cat. This cat introduced itself as ‘Ruri,’ and I believe that Ruri might possess mana on par with your own, Your Majesty...”

That incited another aide who had been patiently listening this entire time to violently interject, “A mere cat simply cannot possess power to equal that of the noble King of Dragonkins. Surely you are mistaken!”

“At first, I thought that I was sensing the mana of the spirit that accompanied it, but I am positive, without a shadow of a doubt. It is also capable of telepathic communication and possesses enough intelligence to smoothly converse with me.”

“A cat telepathically communicating?!”

Claus went on to explain to everyone about the recent correspondence he’d been having with Chelsie.

“I see, Chelsie...” said the Dragon King under his breath. He repeated her name, seemingly at a loss for words. His sentiments most likely mimicked Claus’ own from earlier.

“I don’t know how Chelsie stumbled upon a Beloved, but I’m assuming that cat is a type of magic beast. There are cases of similar highly-intelligent magic beasts being born every so often, after all.”

Claus seemed to agree with the Dragon King’s reasoning. “Indeed, my mother told me long ago that creatures with strong mana inhabited that forest, which leads me to believe this cat is one of those.” Oblivious to the extreme misunderstanding they were taking part in, every person present agreed. That left them to consider their new Beloved’s situation going forward.

“Well, it helps that we can communicate with it and vice-versa. What is the Beloved doing right now?”

“I have them staying at my home. I left instructions with the house servants not to approach them. I wish to avoid any sort of careless mistakes inciting the spirits’ wrath.”

“That was the correct decision. We’ll look after the Beloved in the castle.”

“That is a relief, sir. It would seem that the Beloved does not know of the ways of this land, so my mother instructed me to teach them.”

“Very well. We’ll save final decisions until after I’ve met with them.”

“I would think if it does not know our ways that it would be quite the simple, docile little creature, would it not?” an aide wise-cracked with a hearty chuckle.

Just then, an intense and uncomfortable shiver ran down the spines of all present, including the Dragon King. They all went on high alert and scanned their surroundings desperately.

That was when several spirits floating near the window caught their eyes.

“Spirits...?”

"We're here to give you a warning."

"Warning, warning..."

All present lifted their eyes and were met with the countenances of the spirits who were repeating the word "warning" over and over.

Neither the Dragon King nor his vassals had ever heard of spirits behaving this way, so they naturally froze up.

"Warning Number One!"

"Number One~"

The spirits were clearly displaying anger, but this repetition shtick was diluting the tension in the air. The spirits' words felt a little anticlimactic.

"Don't you dare hurt a hair on Ruri's head!"

"Death to anybody who hurts her~"

Once they heard the name "Ruri," it was clear to everyone what they were being warned about.

"Warning Number Two!"

"Number Two~"

"Don't you dare ignore Ruri's wishes!"

After hearing that, one of the aides interjected. "So basically we just have to convince this 'Ruri' of the wisdom in our plan and obtain her consent?"

The spirits huddled together and whispered amongst themselves. Then, after apparently reaching a consensus, they turned to face everyone once again.

"It's fine if it's okay with Ruri, but it's not if you force her."

"Just, don't try to take advantage of the fact that she doesn't know anything."

"Next, Warning Number Three!"

"If you ever make Ruri sad or feel unwelcome..."

"You'll feel the flames~"

"You'll drown in water~" The fire and water spirits spoke over one another,

soon breaking out into a verbal scuffle over which one was more scary sounding.

From the Dragon King and his court's perspective, either method put their lives in jeopardy, so they wanted to staunchly refuse both, but the spirits continued to bicker like a couple of kids fighting over what they should have for dinner.

"Why not both?" another spirit suggested, unable to stand the sight of them fighting any longer. Their faces lit up as if to say that this was a great idea.

"Yup, after we burn them to ashes, we can flush them all away with water."

"Let's call in some spirits that are outside the royal capital too."

"Yeah!" They cried, pumping their tiny fists into the air, looking as if they were going to go rushing into action at any moment.

The Dragon King and his court all went very pale and frantically broke up this little pep rally.

*"Wait a second! We haven't even *done* anything to them yet!"*

The spirits had completely forgotten their initial objective. *"Oops,"* they all said collectively, looking quite embarrassed.

"Eheheh, right, almost forgot."

"Oopsie, oopsie~"

If they hadn't been stopped, they might have ridden that high and wiped out the royal capital, which sent a shiver down everyone's spine, yet again.

"Anyway, honor our wishes."

"And make sure you don't forget that we'll get you if you bully Ruri. Alright, bye~" The spirits exited like a storm, leaving every person in the room in stagnant silence, all lost in their own thoughts.

After a little while, the Dragon King spoke up. "Claus, does this Beloved have a firm control over their emotions? They're not the type of being who raises a fuss over the slightest thing that doesn't suit their fancy, like some sort of infant, I pray?" This was an extremely important question. Ruri's slightest whim

could launch an all-out assault on the royal capital, and the nation wouldn't withstand an attack launched by the spirits for the sake of their Beloved. If they didn't have any patience, then the damage the country would take in the future would be immense.

"No, it did not seem to be that way. They were very calm as they conversed with me and displayed impressive manners. Oh, which reminds me, they also remonstrated the spirits for being too noisy."

"And the spirits abided?"

"Yes, once they told them to be quiet, they did just that."

After contemplating once more, the Dragon King returned to his initial conclusion. "I believe assessing this being in a face-to-face meeting is the best option after all. Is the Beloved willing to come to the castle?"

"Well, they didn't seem very keen on the idea..." replied Claus, his voice naturally growing quiet seeing as how they had been viciously warned about ignoring Ruri's wishes just a few moments ago.

"In that case, get confirmation from them first and if they don't want to come here, then that's fine; don't strong-arm them. If they don't wish to come here, I'll simply send men to guard them there."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Very well, then," Claus said with a respectful bow, leaving the royal office to pick up Ruri.

The Dragon King breathed a heavy, annoyed sigh at this whole situation. "The Nation of the Dragon King hasn't had a Beloved for a while, but is this how it is for Beloveds in other nations?" he asked his remaining aides.

None knew the answer, however, and shook their heads in response. "Currently, both the Nation of the Spirit King and the Nation of the Beast King have Beloveds of their own, but I have never heard of spirits personally appearing to deliver warnings before," said one aide.

"Perhaps the difference in their abilities as Beloveds is the reason? If so, it would mean this individual must possess quite the substantial amount of mana favored by the spirits," chimed in another.

“Seems that they cause just as much *chaos* as they do *blessings*, eh?”

“Nevertheless, Sire, to think we have a Beloved in our midst now. We must count our lucky stars that they showed themselves here and not in Nadasha.”

“You can say that again,” said the Dragon King, dropping his eyes to the documents in his hands and sighing deeply once more.

Chapter 14: Coming to the Castle

Left by herself in Claus' house, Ruri held back a yawn from sheer boredom.

After a while, a few of the spirits who had gone to take care of some important spirit business returned.

"Ruri, we're back~"

"Welcome back. Where did you guys go?"

"Lady Lydia asked us to run an errand!"

"She told us to give 'em the third-degree."

"So we did our best to give them exactly that!"

"Uh-huh, I see... Wait, 'third degree'? Where did Lydia even learn that expression...? Also, who is 'them' and why are you giving them the 'third-degree' in the first place?"

Lydia had a penchant for blunt and rather coarse speech from time to time. It would seem that she had picked it up from her former contract-bearers, which was why she would sometimes say some rather unladylike things.

"By the way, how long are you gonna stay as that white kitty cat, Ruri?"

"Hmm, well, I actually would like to turn back as soon as possible, but it would be too confusing for Claus-san if he came back to me being a human and not a cat, right? That's why I'm going to wait until he comes back so I can show him."

Not long after the spirits returned from their errand, the door opened and Claus stepped into the room. Claus took a knee in front of Ruri as she sat on the sofa and looked her in the eyes.

"I have spoken with His Majesty and he wishes to invite you to the castle. Would you mind accompanying me, if it's not inconvenient for you?"

"Hypothetically, what would happen if I were to say no?" Ruri questioned, cocking her head in bewilderment at Claus, who seemed to be speaking to her

far more politely than when she first arrived—though it could have been her imagination.

“In that event, we would ask you to stay here and bodyguards would be deployed from the castle.”

“Huh? Bodyguards would be kind of overboard.”

“His Majesty said that he has no intention of strong-arming you into living at the castle if you do not wish to, but we have no intention of letting a Beloved spend their time in a place with such lax security.” Although he was saying that either choice was fine, Ruri could tell from Claus’ face that he wanted her to go to the castle. Recalling what Chelsie had said about the possibility of statesmen trying to manipulate her, Ruri kept up her guard.

“What exactly must I do if I go to the castle? Something specific, or...”

“Nothing at all. You can do whatever it is you so desire. It would simply mean moving into the castle and making it your residence; there would be no restrictions to what you can and cannot do. I, of course, also have an obligation to fulfill my mother’s request that you be protected.”

Ruri would have been opposed to the idea if he were being pompous, but with him speaking to her so deferentially, she was finding it hard to say no. And, technically, Ruri was the one asking for a favor to begin with, so she wouldn’t feel great asking for too much and putting Claus in a difficult situation.

Chelsie, the person she trusted most in this world, had trusted Claus to look after her, and Claus, in turn, wanted her to go to the castle. Hence, Ruri decided to go along with Claus’ wishes.

“All right, then,” Ruri replied amicably.

“Thank you very much,” Claus said, relief written clearly across his face.

Ruri saw that reaction and looked at him with pity, thinking that being caught between his love for Chelsie and his duty to the Dragon King was hard for him. This was an incorrect assumption.

The real meaning behind Claus’ look of relief was because, unbeknownst to Ruri, he was free of the stress of trying to bring her to the castle without

angering the spirits.

“Now then, shall we be off?”

With a carriage already prepared, Ruri and Claus both climbed aboard and made their way to the castle. The spirits flew around the outside of the carriage, following along the whole ride. They clearly didn't care for being cooped up in cramped places.

“Um... if you don't mind me asking, just how far do the spirits abide by your wishes?”

“In all the time I've lived with them, they've never refused me once.”

“Let's say for example, you were in a position where someone ended up injuring you, but it wasn't done intentionally. The spirits decide to attack that person. If you were to tell them to stop, would they?”

“Aah, well, things have gotten dicey that way in the past, but if I tell them to stop, they will stop, albeit reluctantly.”

For the rest of the ride the two continued to speak, mainly about the spirits. To Ruri, it was a light conversation, but to Claus, it was anything but.

He was trying to figure out just how far the spirits were willing to listen to Ruri, but she was oblivious to this fact. However, seeing the relieved expression on Claus' face did make her question his choice in facial expressions in the first place. As she considered this, she suddenly remembered the bracelet and figured now would be as good a time as any to explain the situation.

However, Claus' next words made Ruri freeze up before she could.

“Honestly, thank God that you're not a human,” he said offhandedly. Ruri felt cold all over.

“...Is there something wrong with humans?” Ruri was wholeheartedly glad that she'd decided to stick with telepathic communication. If she were speaking with her mouth instead, she would have been afraid of the words getting stuck in her throat.

“Humans quickly become drunk with power, and they're greedy. When one thing doesn't satisfy them, they covet the next and the next after that. They'll

try to take what they want by force if it suits their needs. I absolutely shudder to think what would happen if a Beloved with your caliber of mana were a human.”

The disgust and displeasure for humans seeping through his face and each word out of his mouth sent cold shivers down her spine.

It was hard to tell, with her being a cat, but if she were in human form then it would have been very obvious how stiff Ruri’s expression had become. *(But, wait. Huh? I thought the Nation of the Dragon King was a nation of all races and creeds, where even humans lived...)* For a nation that prided itself in that, Claus’ speech about humans was very odd.

Ruri had been prepared to tell him that she was human, but now she was at a loss for words.

(Maybe I should keep pretending to be a cat for the time being...) Fortunately for her, Claus hadn’t called her catness into question. With things how they stood, she couldn’t help but be paranoid about how his treatment of her would change once he found out she was human. Ruri didn’t know Claus’ full intentions, so she decided to keep her mouth shut and see how things played out for a little while longer.

They rocked around in the carriage, exchanging chit-chat, and eventually reached the castle. Without wasting a single moment, Claus led Ruri to the royal office.

The castle where the Dragon King resided was located atop a tall, rocky mountain that towered above even the clouds. Ruri had wondered about this mountain ever since she came to the royal capital, but she was shocked to find out that it was the home of the royal castle itself. Said castle was in the style of a European palace, just like the buildings in the town; it was literally a place fit for a king. Just looking at it raised the question of how they’d managed to build it atop this rocky mountain in the first place, but this world had flying dragonkins and magic. It was probably simpler than she thought.

The floor Ruri walked on was so pristine you could see your reflection in it. She looked around at all the gaudy decorated items—including things as functional as a simple candelabra. The extravagance made Ruri’s jaw drop. She

was sure she was walking around with the dopiest look on her face. The feeling that she didn't belong here made it hard for her to even walk down the corridors.

They passed many people along the way, and each time they would stop in their tracks, gaze at Ruri with her spirit entourage and rub their eyes to make sure that they weren't hallucinating. Thankfully, Ruri had Claus, a royal adviser, to act as a buffer and keep a sharp eye on her, so not a single person tried to approach her.

"This is His Majesty's office. Are you ready?"

"I'm pretty nervous..." Ruri admitted, her whiskers twitching with her tension. Claus looked at her and smiled encouragingly, slowly opening the door and allowing Ruri to walk into the office first.

In the back of the room, there was a single desk with stacks upon stacks of documents. Sitting at the desk was a man diligently focused on his work—the Dragon King.

The Dragon King's focus had been squarely on the documents, but he stopped the furious scribbles of his pen to look up, rise from his chair, and head toward Ruri.

When Ruri made eye contact with the Dragon King, she was floored.

(Oh my God, he's absolutely stunning.)

His eyes were sharp and narrow, the bridge of his nose was slender and fine, and his jet-black hair was almost shoulder length and tied into a ponytail.

His deep green eyes, which sucked you in, gave Ruri an odd, minor case of déjà vu, but all of that dispersed in the face of the Dragon King's features—features that seemed almost painstakingly crafted by the gods.

He was so attractive, in fact, that he didn't seem real.

To be honest, though, Claus and all the people they'd passed along the way to the office were also very attractive. It was hard to say anything for Chelsie since she was advanced in age, but it was said that dragonkin were generally attractive, meaning that she was probably no slouch in the looks department in

her younger days. Given that, she could see why their king would be as beautiful as he was.

Even though Ruri had been around plenty of beautiful men and women, by way of her mother's profession as a model, she found herself so entranced that she couldn't even speak. Her mouth agape, she was making quite the gormless expression, but it was difficult for non-cats to tell with her feline face. She simply stared. The Dragon King furrowed his brow in doubt.

"Is there something on my face?"

Ruri came back to her senses, shaking her head. *"No, not at all."*

"Good to know, then." The Dragon King moved to the sofa that was opposite his cluttered desk. He invited Ruri to sit across from him.

At first, her eyes had been fixed on the Dragon King's features, but after she took another look at him, his grace as a ruler—the overwhelming presence and power he commanded just by sitting there—started to permeate into her body.

She felt his beautiful face doubling those effects.

As she sat across from the most influential person in the land, everyone in the room watched—Claus, standing off to the side, and the aides, who had been in the room the whole time.

It felt less as if she were being watched over and more like she was being investigated. It was starting to make Ruri feel extremely uncomfortable.

Picking up on the subtle signs conveyed by Ruri's heart, the spirits stuck to Ruri's side and shot the onlookers glares that clearly communicated, "stop bullying our girl." Claus and the others got the message and quickly let their eyes wander.

The Dragon King's next words were directed not to Ruri but to Claus and his aides.

"All of you, clear out."

"Huh? But, Your Majesty..."

He wanted to be alone with Ruri before they could even discern if she was safe or not, causing all the other aides aside from Claus to speak up in protest,

but the Dragon King silenced them with his gaze and kicked everyone out of the room.

“I’m sorry, they’re all just nervous. We haven’t had a Beloved in the Nation of the Dragon King in many ages.” Now that the room held just the two of them and the spirits, the Dragon King spoke to her in a tone that was far gentler than she’d predicted, bringing Ruri’s tension level down a peg.

“Oh, I can’t say I blame them for being wary of someone like me coming out of nowhere.”

“That’s quite the relief to hear you say,” said the Dragon King, relaxing the tension in his face. “Now then, as for your plans moving forward, what is it you wish to do here in the royal capital? I was told that Claus was instructed to take care of you by Chelsie, but do you have some sort of objective in mind?”

“I don’t have anything you’d necessarily call an ‘objective’... But, you see, I don’t know anything of this world. So I’ve simply come to see how the people of this land live on a daily basis, studying your ways. Chelsie-san told me that I should start thinking about how I’m going to live my life here.”

“You don’t seem too keen on the idea yourself.”

“...”

Her life out in the forest with Chelsie had been lovely. On top of that, learning a new way of life in the royal capital, in order to decide on where she’d be living despite wanting to just go back to the forest, was something that Ruri couldn’t help but be reluctant about. But Chelsie had said she had no choice in the matter...

The Dragon King had caught on to that sentiment hanging in the corner of Ruri’s mind. Unable to answer back after having her true thoughts guessed so accurately, Ruri hung her head.

The Dragon King didn’t pursue the matter any further.

“Well, I have no intention of prying any deeper. I’m the one who requested that you come to the castle to live instead of Claus’ house. I will provide you with everything. If there is anything you may need, just let me know.”

"Thank you very much."

"I'll hire tutors for you if you'd like to learn about the ways of our land. I don't intend on limiting the scope of your activities, but I would appreciate it if you would tell us if you plan on leaving the castle."

"Yes sir." That was extremely generous. Leaving a message before she went anywhere was practically nothing.

"In exchange, I have a request. If by some off-chance someone in this land ever harms you or treats you with disrespect, I'd like you to tell me first. I'll handle the situation accordingly. I would also appreciate it if you'd stop the spirits should they go berserk," said the Dragon King, glancing over at the spirits by Ruri's side.

Even a person of the Dragon King's caliber couldn't quell the spirits' rage, and seeing as how Ruri was still the absolute object of the spirits' protection, *she* was his only hope. Since the Nation of the Dragon King had been devoid of a Beloved for a long time, how to build a relationship with one was all guesswork for him. This desperation naturally came through in his voice.

"I will ask the spirits not to act of their own accord. Even if I'm attacked, don't just carelessly attack, okay guys?" Ruri switched her focus from the Dragon King to the spirits.

The spirits all replied energetically.

"Okay!"

"We won't!"

Ruri's attitude was amicable and, while it wasn't guaranteed that they'd stick to their word, the spirits were following Ruri's orders so far. The comfort the Dragon King gained from seeing this softened his expression.

"...I have one more, last request."

"What might that be?" He looked at her with a serious expression all of a sudden, prompting Ruri to brace herself for what he might say next.

"Erm... would it be okay if I were to pet your head?"

"Pardon...?" Ruri's eyes shot open in surprise.

As for the Dragon King, he turned his head away as if embarrassed by what he'd said. His face was flushed ever so slightly.

"I mean, um, the dragonkin are an extremely strong race, you see. Especially the Dragon King, who's picked because of their power. I am a fan of cats and dogs and even tried to keep them as pets several times in my youth, but animals have an instinctive fear of the dragonkin, which causes them to go half-mad and run away. So, I've never really touched a small animal..." Unexpected as it was, it was clear that he was a fan of the cute and cuddly. The juxtaposition between his cool looks and his love for animals made for a stark contrast.

"But, um, I'm not ordering you to, of course."

"No, it's fine." Since he was going to be providing her with the necessities, a few head pats was a small price to pay.

Once Ruri gave the go ahead, the Dragon King broke out into a pleased smile and timidly placed his hand on Ruri's head.

He was rather anxiously checking to see if Ruri was afraid or not, but he began to sense that Ruri wouldn't run away from him and started to softly stroke her.

He touched her gently, as if handling a delicate item, making Ruri grin in delight at the sensation.

Since this was the first time the Dragon King had ever played with a cat, he found it difficult to stop. However, his aides, who had been run out of the room, grew worried over not being called for and assumed the worst. Panicked, the pack of aides all rushed into the room.

With his blissful moment disturbed, the Dragon King simply gave his vassals an ill-tempered glare.



After concluding her talk with the Dragon King, Ruri exited the royal office, without mentioning to him that she was actually a human, and followed Claus as he led her to a room pre-prepared for Beloveds—a room that each nation always had set aside.

(Holy moly, it's so much room.) The space was so vast that it was hard to

believe that it was really meant for just one Beloved. It seemed even bigger since Ruri was currently in cat form, and therefore much smaller than if she were in human form. The room was full of natural wood—a look suited for both male and female Beloveds—but the decorations and craftsmanship left Ruri absolutely floored.

A Beloved hadn't sprung up in the Nation of the Dragon King for many years, but it seemed the room went through periodic cleaning as there wasn't a single speck of dust on any of the furniture. Looking up, a beautiful, glittering chandelier illuminated the room and made it look even more lavish.

"Claus-san, is it really okay for me to use this room? I'm thinking that you might have made a mistake..." This was *not* a room you'd give to a cat.

"No, no mistakes. This is the right room. Every nation has a room prepared within it that is as luxurious or even more so than that of the King, so this is standard."

"Hmm, Chelsie-san said that you would treat me with care, but I never expected this much."

"...Speaking of which, are you hungry?"

"Well, now that you mention it..." Ruri hadn't eaten since she'd first arrived at Claus' house in the morning, and it was already past lunchtime. She found herself hungry as soon as the topic was brought up.

"I shall bring a meal for you. Erm, actually, what do cats usually eat? Fish, meat, milk... No vegetables, correct?" Claus made it apparent that he'd never had a cat, as he listed off items that cats ate according to common knowledge.

However, Ruri simply had the appearance of a cat; she was a human on the inside.

"Um, I'm fine with normal food—the kind everyone else eats."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yes, and I would appreciate it if you could put it on a normal plate as well." She would lose her appetite if they were to bring her mushed-up cat food and some milk on a saucer. Ruri vastly preferred he bring her food on a plate that

normal people would eat from.

“Well then, I’ll go fetch something now, but are you sure it won’t upset your stomach?”

“Yes, positive,” she assured him. She was almost tempted to tack on “because I’m a human,” but kept it on the inside. In fact, seeing as how she wanted to keep up the masquerade, yet, at the same time, not be mistakenly treated as a real cat, she added, *“I’m not like normal cats, so don’t worry.”*

Claus left the room and returned after a short absence with a cart loaded with a meal—a meal that looked impossible for one person to consume by themselves.

“Um, are you going to be eating here as well, Claus-san?”

“Not at all. This is all for you. I informed the head chef that you would eat anything, but without knowing your specific likes, they prepared a wide array of different foods. Choose whichever of these suits your tastes and I’ll take away the rest.”

“What will you do with what I don’t pick?”

“I will bring it to the soldiers after their training exercises. They are healthy eaters, after all. And they rarely get the opportunity to partake in the head chef’s cuisine, so they will clean their plates with gusto.”

“That is great news, then.” Ruri had been worried that he would simply dispose of the unwanted food, but now she felt at ease. Without reserve, she picked out several dishes that interested her from the cart and had Claus move them to the table.

“I have work to attend to, so please make sure to ring if you need anything else,” Claus said, leaving a bell on the table and exiting the room with the cart hauling the remaining food.

Ruri waited for Claus to exit and listened as his footsteps got farther away.
“...Is he gone?”

“Yup, he’s gone.”

“Guys, will you let me know if anyone comes near the room?”

“Okay, sure thing!”

Ruri saw the spirits raise their hands, telling her to leave it to them. Ruri then had the spirit closest to her remove the bracelet on her wrist and she returned to human form. She let out a small *phew* and her eyes, now human, took in the scope of the room once more.

“This is incredible. Should I really be staying here?” Chelsie’s house had been big too, but it didn’t hold a candle to this place’s level of roominess and extravagance.

In her excitement she decided to check out the entire room while she had the time, opening doors left and right. There was a closet, a powder room, and a parlor which connected into the bedroom. Unfortunately, however, there was no tub or bathing area.

According to Chelsie, there were businesses that would wash those who couldn’t use Purification magic, with anyone else settling with wiping off their bodies the best they could, which meant the concept of soaking in hot water was lost on everyone here.

The lack of a tub was a huge letdown.

She wasn’t sure how long she would be living in this castle, but if it was going to be long, the idea of asking for permission to make one just like the one in Chelsie’s yard was deeply appealing. As these thoughts ran through her mind, she dug into the meal that Claus had brought for her.

After finishing her meal, she asked the spirits to tell Chelsie that she’d arrived at the capital safely.

Due to the unique communication ability spirits shared with one another, they could get the message to Chelsie much faster than delivering a letter via the water box could.

She spent her time checking out every nook and cranny of the room until nightfall, when Claus once again came to deliver her a meal. Unprepared and panicked, she transformed into her cat form hurriedly right before Claus came in. Once he left, she reverted to human form to eat her dinner, after which she felt tired and laid down.

She tossed and turned in the huge bed, unable to catch a wink of sleep. It had been several action-packed days since she left Chelsie's house, so while her body should be exhausted, her mind was wide awake.

She reluctantly rose from bed, put on the bracelet she'd laid on her pillow, and turned back into a cat. Climbing out of bed, she walked toward the door.

"Ruri, where are you going?"

"I can't sleep, so I'm taking a little night walk. I'll hoof it alone, so just wait here, guys."

"Okay, got it!"

Leaving the spirits behind, Ruri walked the dark corridors, lit only dimly by the flames of the candles lining the walls. Her destination was the garden that she passed when she was being shown to her room earlier in the day.

There wasn't anyone around, so the garden was cloaked in silence.

It was probably a side effect of being a cat, but her nocturnal vision was far better than when she was human, so she had no problem walking around without tripping or bumping into anything.

She looked up to see the sky, full of stars. She was able to see them at Chelsie's house as well, but the tall trees often got in the way. Now that she was in this garden that had nothing to obstruct her view, the sky looked incredibly bright and beautiful. She wouldn't be able to get a view this clear in her world, either, where bright lights dominated the sky during the night as well as the day. As she stood there, enraptured, she heard the sound of someone's footsteps from behind her.

She turned around to see the Dragon King himself standing there.

"Couldn't sleep, I take it? ...Actually, cats are supposed to be nocturnal, right?" the Dragon King said, his earnest display of concern making Ruri grin on the inside.

"No, you see, I tried to go to sleep, but I ended up wide awake instead."

"I see. Are you unaccompanied? I don't see any spirits with you," said the Dragon King, perplexed as he checked around her to not find any of the spirits

that usually stuck to her like glue.

“Yes, I’m by myself; I left the others back in the room.”

“Seeing as you can’t sleep, care for a little chat?”

“Of course,” agreed Ruri, not having any reason to say no.

The Dragon King proceeded to sit down next to Ruri. “Is the room to your liking?”

“Yes, it seems almost too good for me. Is it truly all right that I use it?”

“It is. That area is close to my room as well. I’d be grateful if you were to use that room, if only for security’s sake.”

“If you say so, then I will.” She was never truly opposed to the idea of using the room in the first place. So as long as she had the okay from him, she would graciously use it.

“Your name is... Ruri, if I recall correctly?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you feel as though you can handle living here?”

Ruri paused for a moment and cocked her head.

“Hmm, I can’t say I’m sure yet. Chelsie-san sent me out here to pick one of three options—either keep living with her, live in the royal capital as a Beloved, or live someplace else. But I don’t really have a firm grasp on how I’m supposed to live here, practically speaking. There isn’t anything that I specifically wish to do either...”

“So you’re here because Chelsie sent you. I see... You seem to be very attached to Chelsie. Listening to you now, it sounds as though you’d like to go back to living with her.”

“Not only did Chelsie-san take me in when I was going through some very hard times, she took care of me despite us having never met before; I couldn’t help but become attached to her. I feel right at home at Chelsie-san’s, and, honestly, I only feel anxious when I think of looking for any other way to live.”

Chelsie had said that she was also fine with Ruri continuing to live with her,

which was the option Ruri was leaning toward, but she knew that she couldn't depend on her forever. That being said, she had no one else in this world but Chelsie, and she was afraid of all the unknowns. She felt like a baby bird trying to leave the nest.

She realized that, from an objective standpoint, she had become more dependent on Chelsie than she had thought.

"Well, no need to rack your brain over this. I've invited you to stay at the castle, but I don't intend on limiting what you're allowed to do, so you can go home whenever you'd like. I'll provide you with teachers if you don't know what to do here, so you can learn the Nation of the Dragon King's way of life. After all, Chelsie made it a point for us to teach you our customs and culture. Why don't you try talking to some of the other people in the castle too?" suggested the Dragon King as he patted Ruri's head.

"I shall. Thank you very much."

"I can also spare time to discuss things with you. Well, speaking as the king, it would be great if you could stay in the castle seeing as how you're a Beloved. Just do me a favor and take that into consideration."

"Yes, I will."

Ruri had initially wondered if this "king" would be self-absorbed and condescending, but the Dragon King spoke with her in a kind and cordial manner, much to her surprise, which helped lessen some of her fears about living in the castle.

Right as Ruri was basking in relief at him and Claus being good people, she could hear the Dragon King, as he was petting her head, murmur, "Small animals are great after all..."

That took her by surprise. The reason the Dragon King wanted her to stay in the castle might not be because she was a Beloved, but because she was a cat...



Chapter 15: Joshua

Chelsie's grandson, Joshua, served as an intel operative in the Nation of the Dragon King.

The first thing that Joshua thought after learning some unsettling intel and beginning his investigation into Nadasha was, "Is this country going to be alright?"

And what he thought after learning that they'd summoned an entity known as the Princess Priestess, said to bring about great prosperity, was, "This country is done for..."

Although, Nadasha's days had always been numbered.

They didn't realize how weak they were in the grand scheme of things, waging war against the Nation of the Dragon King on several occasions and getting pounded into the dirt each and every time. Despite that, they never learned from their defeats and would proceed to launch countless wars no matter who their king was.

And the ones who really suffered were the people of Nadasha.

Their taxes were excessive and their draft was mandatory. Nadasha was encompassed by trees, so the soil was perfect for agriculture, but there couldn't be any harvest without workers to tend to the fields. Nevertheless, they kept up their draft and the nation was left to struggle along in poverty. And despite the paucity of the nation's finances, the Prince was lovestruck over the summoned Priestess Princess and provided her with large amounts of tribute.

That was when something happened, marking the end of the nation, right in front of Joshua's eyes.

"Oh, come on! You guys got the *wrong one*," Joshua groaned, exasperated as he peeked into a window of the castle from atop a tree and observed what was happening in the room.

Inside, surrounded by the King and his soldiers, a young girl was forced to the

ground and charged with an assassination plot against the Priestess Princess.

Because humans had little mana in comparison to demi-humans and weaker senses, none of them seemed to notice, but Joshua could clearly see them—see the countless number of spirits all gathered around the young girl undergoing such terrible treatment.

It didn't help that all of them were so clearly upset that Joshua could feel their emotionally-charged mana from outside the window.

"Are these people freaking idiots? What the hell are they doing to the Beloved? ...Oh God, that soldier just kicked her. You're all through," he said, sighing in both exasperation and irritation, even though he knew that none of the people there could see the spirits.

The second that the soldier kicked the girl, the spirits glared at him with sheer rage.

Joshua wondered how he could be oblivious to such extreme anger, but then, on second thought, the guy might be better off being blissfully ignorant.

"Man, what should I do...?" He couldn't just abandon the Beloved, but if he did step in, he wouldn't be able to conduct his spy work here anymore. Joshua still had many things he wanted to investigate.

While he contemplated this, the girl was placed into a carriage and taken outside the castle walls. He judged from the direction that it was heading to the place the Nadashians called the "Mystic Forest."

The same forest that his grandmother, Chelsie, called home.

"Maybe I should leave this to Grandma." Joshua then called out to stop the spirits chasing after the girl. "My Grandma lives in the forest, so lead the girl to her house. I'm sure she'll take care of her."

"She won't hurt Ruri?"

"She sure won't. There's not a dragonkin stupid enough to hurt a Beloved, so don't you worry. In exchange, could you perhaps spare this nation?" Joshua's tone was casual, but he felt exactly the opposite on the inside. These spirits possessed enough power and clout to easily demolish an entire nation if any

harm befell a Beloved.

One hand wouldn't be enough to count the nations that had vanished off the map that way.

Furthermore, from what Joshua could tell, the Beloved seemed to be under the protection of a considerable number of spirits.

"Aw, wha? They bullied Ruri, so no thanks!" the spirit replied in dissatisfaction.

Joshua scratched at his head, perplexed, until he came up with something. "So hey, look, the Beloved had a friend that was summoned along with her, right? You know, that 'Priestess Princess' or whatever they're calling her. I think the Beloved would be *mighty* sad if you level the nation while her friend is still in it."

"It'd make Ruri sad?"

"Oh, yeah." His reason was pretty half-assed, but the spirits thought long and hard about it. They reluctantly agreed and went after the girl, leaving Nadasha unscathed.

...It was only a moment's reprise, however, as the girl lauded as the Priestess Princess noticed the absence of the Beloved and raised a huge commotion. Then the King fabricated that the Nation of the Dragon King had abducted her in order to cover up what they'd done. Naturally, Joshua had steam coming out of his ears after hearing that. He almost regretted keeping the spirits from razing Nadasha to the ground.

However, the following day, the priests of Nadasha found they were unable to use magic.

The reason why was obvious: the spirits had boycotted them.

Apparently, the spirits had overheard the Beloved's angry words over what Nadasha had done to her, so they took action of their own accord.

Joshua was torn over the spirit's retribution—he didn't know whether he should hope that his Grandma would hurry up and collect the Beloved, before she could inadvertently curse Nadasha further, or congratulate the spirits for a

job well done.

A few days later, he received a letter from Chelsie, via the water tray, that she had indeed safely collected the Beloved.

The human priests didn't have much mana to begin with and couldn't use magic to anywhere near the extent that demi-humans could. Plus, they were able to use magic again after only a few days, so it didn't have a huge effect on the people's way of life. They didn't use much magic in their daily routines anyway. However, it *was* a huge blow to the priests' credibility, and that of the Priestess Princess herself.

The priests were worshiped for their ability to use magic, allowed to do pretty much whatever they pleased, and carried enormous amounts of authority. But losing that magic, however briefly, had shown the people that, without it, the priests were even weaker than a regular person. They also rebuked the King for trying to incite a war, and made it known that now they had misgivings over whether this Priestess Princess, "bringer of prosperity," was really who she claimed to be.

Although the King and Priests were desperate to douse those flames, the Priestess Princess was as oblivious as could be.

Though her friend, who she raised such a big commotion over, had actually been exiled over false assassination charges, she completely bought the lie that the Nation of the Dragon King was to blame—seeing her buy this lie was downright comical to Joshua.

She didn't even realize she was being manipulated.

Joshua thought that it was probably in the people's best interests that this nation be assimilated into the Nation of the Dragon King. However, things weren't that simple. According to the agreement made by the Alliance of the Four Nations, which included the Nation of the Dragon King, they were strictly forbidden from expanding their territory via invading another nation.

If Nadasha voluntarily merged with the Nation of the Dragon King, then that would be no problem. In fact, among the nations that bordered them, there were many that had chosen to become a part of their domain in order to gain the powerful Dragon King's protection. Of course, that was all a moot point

considering that the King and Head Priest of Nadasha didn't know how to learn from their mistakes. The only thing the Nation of the Dragon King could do was fight back in the event that Nadasha tried to invade them.

Joshua thought about it—and thought about it for a while.

There were a fair share of aristocrats concerned over Nadasha's current domestic situation. Many even advised the King to put the country's energies into suppressing uprisings rather than starting a war. There was just one factor that silenced those dissenting aristocrats, the one prophesied to lead them to prosperity—the Priestess Princess. And, while the Priestess Princess' goal was mostly just to reclaim her lost friend, she was nonetheless on board with going to war against the Nation of the Dragon King. There were people starting to crop up, people reconsidering their country's chance of winning now that the prosperity-bringer, the Priestess Princess, was behind the war. This meant that if she were no longer around to lead the charge, then the King wouldn't be able to launch his war efforts anywhere near as easily.

An idea occurred to Joshua; without having to go to the extreme of killing her, it might be possible to influence the Priestess Princess out of Nadasha. Squashing her role as the one spearheading the charge would be extremely easy, but there was something else on Joshua's mind. Placing this possibility aside for the time being, he infiltrated their temple in the dead of night while all were asleep.

He was after only one thing—the book containing the prophecy about the Priestess Princess.

From the diligent investigation he had undergone during his many trips to Nadasha, he knew that the Head Priest kept the prophecy safe in his room. Under the cloak of darkness, Joshua slipped past the patrolling sentries and snuck into his quarters. Once there, he used the wind to blow sleeping powder into the sleeping priest's bedroom to ensure he wouldn't wake. Still, he entered as quietly as he could.

He assumed looking for the book would be difficult, but he actually found it quite quickly. It had simply been placed on the bookshelf in his study.

Joshua scanned the prophecy and let out a heavy sigh. "I knew it..."

Joshua'd had his suspicions this entire time.

Blonde hair and blue eyes—the Priestess Princess had been set apart by that uncommon color combination, but he knew that it was all a sham.

When she finally ran out of colored contacts and the undyed roots of her hair began to show, people rushed to the King to counsel doubt and suspicion. However, the King dismissed their claims by asserting that dark eyes and dark hair were uncommon as well.

While it was true that dark eyes and hair were rare in this world, the Priestess Princess was a crucial position for Nadasha. It was a wonder he was able to pass that judgment so soon after finding out that she had features radically different from the ones required for the Priestess Princess.

To add insult to injury, there had been another girl with dark eyes and dark hair that was summoned along with her. One who still lived in the castle with her.

Even though there was, naturally, a possibility that their savior was actually the other girl, who'd had the same coloring, the King adamantly insisted that the current Princess Priestess was indeed the real Princess Priestess. But, why...?

The answers to Joshua's questions were all written in the book of prophecy he held in his hands.

“How rotten can these people get? Now that I've learned this, I sure as hell can't extract her without a solid plan. Plus, what if the Beloved were to find out about this? She'd probably go off the rails...” A shiver ran down Joshua's spine as he imagined the damage *that* could lead to.

“This is bad news. Freaking terrible. I need to talk this over with Grandma. Mm-hmm, for sure.”

Joshua slipped out of the temple. He spent the next two years diligently gathering intel every day. Once he was satisfied, he made his way back to the Nation of the Dragon King.

Chapter 16: Mana Wavelengths

In the royal office, Claus was reading the report that his son Joshua, recently returned from Nadasha, had written.

“—And that is his report.” After hearing the detailed dossier, the Dragon King placed his fingers on his temples and breathed out an extremely annoyed sigh.

“Looks like war is inevitable after all, eh? What an absolute mess. Inform the troops: be prepared to engage opposing forces.”

“As you command.”

“So where is Joshua now?”

“He departed to search for the girl in question, on orders from the elders, as soon as he handed over his report. However, he has informed us that he wasn’t able to find any such girl in the royal capital. He found the thugs, but they said that they ran into her only once more; they chased her again after running into her the following day and then lost sight of her right in the middle of their pursuit. She hasn’t been seen or heard of since.”

“Not even Joshua has been able to find her?” the Dragon King questioned, a little surprised.

Joshua, who possessed a mana wavelength that was especially favored by the wind spirits, was capable of thoroughly surveying an area as expansive as the royal capital. Using the power of the wind, Joshua was able to find out a multitude of things—like how many kittens had been born that day and where, or that the couple that ran the greengrocer were having a marital spat.

But that same Joshua couldn’t find this one human girl.

“Strangely enough, she doesn’t seem to have *left* the capital, but he also wasn’t able to locate her here, not even by using the spirits to search the entirety of the city.”

After a moment’s consideration, a sharp light came into the Dragon King’s

eyes. “She’s been kidnapped, then?”

“I believe the chances are high.” The royal capital was known internationally as a major port city. Many merchant ships came to the capital for business. Also, they served as a supply area for ships heading to the Nation of the Spirit King or the Imperial Nation.

Slavery was banned in the Nation of the Dragon King, and slave trader’s ships were barred from anchoring, but that didn’t stop it from happening outside of the eye of the law.

There was no shortage of cases of their people being kidnapped by slave traders.

Of course, they employed countermeasures against this, but the slave traders would abduct people by any means available to them, then the nation would once again take countermeasures—they were locked in a never-ending game of cat-and-mouse.

There were demi-humans among the slave traders, so when it came to kidnapping a human—a human woman, to boot—whose strength paled in comparison to that of a demi-human, it was light work for them.

“Joshua is expanding his search to outside the capital walls. That isn’t a guarantee that we will find her, however...”

“I see, I want to track her down if she’s been kidnapped, but that might prove difficult if she was taken off to another nation.”

Claus looked at the expression on the Dragon King’s face, but, outside from a slight furrow of the brow, he seemed relatively placid.

This was rather disarming.

The first person he’d shown any sort of interest in for the first time in a long time—no, for the first time ever, in fact—might’ve been kidnapped, yet his reaction to the news was extremely blasé. Claus had believed that he would be far more shaken up over the matter, but the Dragon King’s reaction seemed to be no more than that of a king concerned for his subjects.

“We’ll have Joshua continue to investigate as there might very well be more

abductees than just her.”

“Yes, sir.”

As they ended their discussion, the Dragon King pulled out something from his desk drawer and stood up. “I’m going to take a short break.”

“...Yes, please, rest easy.” Claus didn’t even attempt to ask where he was going. One look at what he held in his hand made it abundantly clear where he was headed.

Now that the Dragon King had left the office, Claus was alone with his thoughts.

All of his vassals were relieved that the Dragon King had finally showed some sort of interest in the fairer sex, but he hadn’t mentioned the woman in question again after the first time.

This was most likely because the Dragon King was devoted to someone else.

Perhaps it was because their mana wavelengths were so compatible... He went to meet her whenever he had a spare moment. Since they were dragonkin and therefore had strong mana, it was only natural that he would be more powerfully drawn toward those with compatible mana wavelengths. ...But it also made Claus think that the Dragon King’s chances at marriage were *definitely* a long shot now.

The elders were desperately ordering people to search for that girl, but it seemed as though it would all be for nothing no matter what.



Ever since Ruri had come to live in the castle, her mostly self-sufficient way of life had been completely flipped on its head.

She didn’t need to clean or do laundry, and meals were brought to her morning, noon, and night. They had even given her maids, so she was being treated extremely well.

Recently, she had been learning the ways of the world via the teachers that the Dragon King provided for her.

In the morning, she would eat her breakfast and then take her lessons. During

the lessons, she was taught how to read their language in addition to some rudimentary knowledge. She needed to know the language in order to read the documents in the castle's library room. Her hope was that she could find a way to return to her world.

Dragonkins lived long lives. It probably would have been more expedient just to ask one of the people who had lived long enough to become walking encyclopedias, but since she wasn't telling anyone that she was a human, she couldn't explain that she'd been summoned to Nadasha either. She would just have to investigate on her own.

After her lesson, she grabbed lunch and walked around the library. She was looking for any information that might help her find a way back home, relying on her limited knowledge of the language, but she ultimately wasn't able to find any leads. She used the rest of her time to bask in the sun in the garden she'd found on the castle grounds, among other things, as a way to clear her mind.

Incidentally, the subject of her studies today was Beloveds.

There currently existed five Beloveds, including Ruri, and they were all under the care of various nations. The only Beloveds that had been made public out of those five were ones in the Nation of the Spirit King and Beast King.

There was a good reason why the other two nation's Beloveds hadn't been made public. They were suspected of being unconfident in their abilities to protect their Beloveds, since they were such a sought-after entity among all nations, leaving them with no other option but to conceal them.

In Ruri's case, it wasn't finalized that she was affiliated with the Nation of the Dragon King as of yet, so they were still keeping the fact that their nation had a Beloved under wraps.

But this raised doubts within Ruri—doubts about what she had been told, that no one would make a move on a Beloved because of their spirit entourage.

She knew that the spirits were ready to dogpile anyone who would harm her, but she'd been told that there were foolish people who didn't know that out in the world. Apparently, that was mainly in human-ruled nations where many of the populace couldn't see spirits and weren't really privy to their dangers.

She also asked to hear anecdotes of past Beloveds; this closed out her lesson for the day. Once done, she found herself in the castle's garden.

The castle of the Nation of the Dragon King was made up of several buildings stacked around a towering, rocky mountain in a spiral staircase-esque manner.

Those buildings were generally referred to as the "castle," but the building the Dragon King resided in was located at the top of the mountain, soaring above the clouds. The workers of the castle referred to this building as the "royal castle."

The garden in the royal castle had become her favorite spot.

Beyond the garden fence was the precipice, which was so high up that it made your head spin when you peered over it. Ruri wasn't afraid, though, as she could fly.

The rest area for the castle workers was located in the building below, so there weren't any people passing the time in the king's living space. While everyone watched her wherever she went because of her status as a Beloved, she could relax here in the garden and not worry about being the center of attention.

As she sunbathed in the garden above the clouds, the Dragon King appeared. When she got a look at what he was holding in his hand, her eyes turned understandably cold.

"I'm warning you in advance, I will not play with that."

"Why not? I made it just for you." The Dragon King wasn't able to hold in his surprise and a sad look took over his surreally beautiful face.

In his hand was—the Dragon King's handmade cat feather toy.

Ruri applauded his effort, but, unfortunately, she wasn't actually a cat—just a human assuming the form of one.

The Dragon King wasn't deterred, however, and waved the cat toy left and right in front of Ruri's face. It didn't stimulate Ruri's cat-instincts in the slightest. She quickly turned her face to the side in disdain, making the Dragon King furrow his brow.

“Don’t cats like playing with feather toys?”

“I am no normal cat.”

“...”

The Dragon King simply gazed at Ruri, nearly pouting, but she wasn’t batting at that cat toy no matter how pathetic he looked. Although, seeing the sad look in the Dragon King’s eyes made Ruri sympathize and reconsider some things, eventually leading her to offer a compromise.

“...Well, I won’t be playing with any cat toys, but you can touch my paw pads instead.”

“What?!”

Her paw pads were ticklish, so she didn’t like them being touched all that often, but Ruri decided to make an exception this time and held up one of her front legs to the Dragon King, revealing the cute, pink paw pad to him.

He was being allowed to touch the paw pads she didn’t normally allow to be touched. This offer put the Dragon King’s mood back on track.

“If you’re not a fan of cat toys, is there anything else you’d like?” the Dragon King asked her as he squished Ruri’s paw pads. Ruri answered quickly, bearing with the tickling.

“You’ve provided more than enough for my day-to-day life, so there isn’t anything I can think of.”

“There’s nothing you desire, Ruri? I have enough capital at my disposal, so you don’t need to be modest.”

“Your sentiments are as good as any gift. Thank you, regardless.”

The Dragon King looked disappointed. He was probably just starving for the touch of something soft and cuddly. He would visit her several times a day to try to dote on and spoil her, like a grandfather trying to please his first grandchild.

After getting his fill of touching her paw pads, the Dragon King suddenly stood up.

“Are you leaving already?”

“I’d prefer to stay with you a little while longer, but I really should be getting back to work.” With a single pat of Ruri’s head, the Dragon King returned to his office and Ruri reluctantly saw him off.

Ruri pondered over the feeling of dissonance she had lately when she was with him.

When she first met the Dragon King, she hadn’t noticed it. Maybe that had been the nerves, but being at his side was extremely comfortable. If she were to liken it to something it would be... basking in the spring sun or being snug under a kotatsu in winter—it was like being somewhere that you didn’t want to leave.

Those feelings grew stronger and stronger with each passing day, like an addiction or an illness. Even now, with the Dragon King gone, she was left with a deep sense of loneliness and loss. It wasn’t quite the same as not wanting to leave his side out of some kind of romantic longing. It was hard to put into words, but she felt as though some instinct was drawing her in.

The answer to the cause of this mystery sensation came from the spirits that were always with her.

“That’s because the Dragon King’s mana wavelength is just the right fit for you, Ruri!”

“Just like how we find your mana pattern really comfy.”

“Being with someone with a compatible mana wavelength makes any person or spirit feel great.”

As Ruri listened to the spirits’ explanation, Asahi popped into her mind. Ruri remembered Chelsie saying that the reason why Asahi always followed her around was because she was attracted to her mana wavelength. Asahi had clung to her in a way that could only be described as bizarre and abnormal.

Now that she understood that this was how she must’ve felt, she almost understood why Asahi would cling to her no matter how many times she’d tried to shake her. Ruri accepted the feelings the Dragon King caused in her—but she couldn’t help but tremble in fear at the same time.

With mana wavelengths, just because one person was drawn in didn't automatically mean that the other person felt the same way, as Ruri well knew. Like with her and Asahi, there were cases where the relationship was one-sided. She found herself worried that she would cling to and upset the Dragon King the way Asahi had clung to and upset her.

After the constant headaches she'd suffered from Asahi's obnoxious and inappropriate behavior... Ruri didn't want to have that effect on anyone, let alone the Dragon King. So, on that day, she decided to actively avoid him.



Resisting her desire to see the Dragon King, so as not to turn into a pest like Asahi, she avoided going to the garden that they'd always see each other in, and she changed paths whenever it seemed like she might run into him. She spent several days actively avoiding the Dragon King.

Claus would look at her as if he wanted to say something from time to time, but she would ignore it. Eventually, the time came where Claus brought up the subject.

"Ruri, it seems that you are avoiding His Majesty as of late. Has His Majesty done something to upset you?"

"No, he hasn't." Claus had noticed that she was avoiding the Dragon King, so there was no denying it. Ruri awkwardly averted her eyes. She knew that she couldn't run away from him forever, but she didn't know of a good way of dealing with this situation.

"You'll have to pardon me," Claus said, grabbing and lifting Ruri by the scruff of her neck.

"Mrr-wah!" Ruri yelped aloud before asking telepathically, *"What are you doing, Claus-san?!"*

"He isn't going to be able to get through any of his work at this rate."

"Work? What do you mean? Wait, where are we going?!"

Claus carried her to the Dragon King's office, not taking no for an answer, and placed her atop his desk. She was at eye-level with the Dragon King and felt the

comfort of being by his side for the first time in days, but she averted her eyes. She knew she shouldn't be here.

However, once she glanced over at the King, she could see how conflicted he looked.

"Erm... Is something the matter, Dragon King?"

"Yes, very much so. I have been without your soothing presence. I haven't been able to focus on my work since I've been unable to pet you as of late."

At first she thought he was exaggerating, but once she turned to Claus and he silently nodded his head in affirmation, she realized he wasn't.

"Did I do something that upset you somehow? Was it the cat toy? Or perhaps you don't like having your paw pads touched? If you dislike it so much, I can, of course, contain myself," he asked with a serious expression, trying to understand what he had done wrong.

The King was the picture of seriousness, but Claus just looked exasperated.

"If there is a reason, I would appreciate it if you would specify it. I am sure His Majesty has been quite sad that you have suddenly been ignoring him for no clear reason. Now then, I'll be returning to work," Claus said and left the room.

What Claus said was correct. Ruri would be sad if someone she spent a lot of time with suddenly started avoiding her for no reason. After reflecting on it, she decided to try explaining herself, even though she wasn't sure he would understand her reasoning.

"He is right. I'm sorry. Um, you see, according to the spirits, I apparently mesh extremely well with your mana wavelength. And being together like this feels extremely comfortable for me."

"Then why have you been avoiding me?" The Dragon King asked, not following Ruri's logic at all.

"Even if it is good for me, that doesn't necessarily mean that you mesh with my wavelength, right? In the past, I had someone who meshed with my wavelength, but the same didn't apply to myself. They would follow me around wherever I went and wouldn't listen when I told them to stop. Even when I found

an opening to run from them, the moment I saw them chasing me down from behind as if they could sense my presence, I shuddered in fear,” Ruri spoke, recalling the past vividly.

The King looked at her as if he understood what she meant. “There is the occasional person who’ll find someone whose wavelength they’re strongly attracted to and they’ll wrongly assume that the feeling is mutual. And there are also people who will attach themselves to someone because they find being by their side so comforting they can’t think straight.”

“What’s the best way to deal with that situation?”

“Just like other relationships, they’ll eventually feel bad being an annoyance to the other person and back off. Well, there are some people who will be persistent anyways, but a mana wavelength is with you forever. So if they realize they’re not wanted, they should feel compelled to stay away. It all depends on their personality, though.”

Asahi was probably one of those people who assumed that Ruri felt the same way she did. However, the reason she clung to her no matter how often Ruri showed her dislike didn’t seem to be because she was so attracted to her mana that she’d lost her mind. Instead, the answer simply seemed to be that Asahi was so bad at taking hints that she never even noticed that Ruri hated her.

Putting that aside, it appeared as though clingy behavior due to mana attraction was something that happened fairly often in this world. Despite magic’s many conveniences, this one aspect was somewhat of a shortcoming.

“Well, that happened to me, so I didn’t want to put you through the same ordeal. I know how terrible it feels to be chased around by someone you don’t like. I get the urge to be with you more and more whenever I see you, so I’ve been keeping my distance.” Ruri wanted to be near him, but she didn’t want to smother him so much that he hated her like she had Asahi. Considering she had no confidence she’d ever be able to leave his presence if left to her own devices, she decided to get some distance while she still wanted to.

After hearing Ruri’s explanation, his expression was neither distressed nor displeased—it was filled with relief and joy.

“I see. If that is your reason, then you’re fine. You don’t need to avoid me

anymore.”

“Why? Don’t you find having someone hanging around you all the time annoying?” She certainly had.

“All your worries are solved if I feel the same way that you do, Ruri. That’s why I said that you’re fine.”

“You feel the same way, Dragon King, sir?” Ruri’s eyes widened in surprise at this.

“I do. I always feel the same sense of peace from being next to you, but I didn’t want to ruin everything by hanging around you too much and making you dislike me, so I have been keeping my visits to a minimum as much as I could. But if you feel the same way, then there’s no reason to contain myself.” If Claus were in the room, he most likely would have quipped, *“Daily visits are ‘keeping things to a minimum,’eh?”* in response to this statement.

“You can just come to see me; you don’t need to think about me finding you annoying. In fact, *I’ll come to you.*”

“Yes, thank you very much, Dragon King, sir.”

The Dragon King had given her his permission personally, thus resolving the matter so simply that it made Ruri wonder why she even agonized over it for days in the first place.

It made her think. If her and Asahi had had mutually compatible wavelengths, would their relationship have been different?

And as she contemplated that, the Dragon King thought to himself while gazing at her face and spoke up not long after.

“...This has been on my mind for a while now, but calling me ‘Dragon King’ sounds too formal between us. I’d like it if you’d call me ‘Jade’ from now on.”

“...Jade-sama?” Ruri called him by name for confirmation, making Jade smile gently. The sight of such a transcendently handsome individual smiling was breathtaking.

“That works.”

Ruri felt intense palpitations in her chest as she stared at him in fascination.

Jade lifted Ruri up and placed her on his lap. He proceeded to indulge in stroking her fluffy white fur for the first time in several days and he couldn't have looked happier. Ruri also smiled in delight as Jade's large hands petted her. He seemed satisfied with Ruri cradled in his arms.

This day all but confirmed that any marriage plans for the Dragon King were on indefinite hold.

Chapter 17: Exploration

The soft pitter-patter of bare feet hitting the floor echoed as Ruri explored the inside of the castle.

This castle was split into different regions. The first was composed of the area near the top of the mountain where the building the Dragon King resided in was located. As you descended through the castle, you hit the second region, third region and so on—all for a grand total of twelve regions.

Seeing as how Ruri was brimming with excitement to see all of it, she decided to start by exploring the first sector.

It had been a few days since the start of her exploration, but she still hadn't seen everything the region had to offer. Even accounting for the fact that she was doing this in-between studies and at a cat's pace, it was still taking a lot of time. If one region had this much to offer, she couldn't even imagine how big this place actually was. It seemed that she had quite a long way to go before she'd seen the entire thing.

Seeing as how she'd seen the majority of the first region, she decided to shift her exploration over to the lower regions. The second region was composed of official guest rooms, the third region workrooms for high-ranking officials, the fourth region departments for the other officials.

Since the castle wasn't currently housing any official guests, the guest rooms in the second region were all locked and she couldn't look inside them. And the third and fourth regions were both central hubs of political activity. However, she had her reservations about going into a place with so much confidential information. Then again, if she felt so inclined, she could just employ the spirits to gather information for her.

She made her way to the fifth region where the soldiers' stable and training grounds were located.

There were guards posted between each region, and a pass was needed to

enter and exit, but in Ruri's case, her spirit entourage was as good or better than any physical pass. Considering that no one was going to encumber a Beloved's movement, Ruri was allowed to go into any region she pleased based on her reputation alone.

Once she'd descended to the fifth region, she caught sight of women using magic to clean large loads of laundry.

When she made eye contact with one of the women she looked quite startled.

"Oh my! Why, isn't that the Beloved?" The woman's exclamation caused the other women to take notice and look at Ruri with equally startled expressions.

Ruri walked up to them and telepathically greeted them, "*Afternoon to you all.*"

"I overheard some of the dragonkin speaking about them, but this really is the cat Beloved, I see."

"Yes, indeed. I had never heard of it before now, but there really *are* Beloveds that are neither human nor demi-human." All of the ladies' eyes were squarely upon Ruri.

She had mentally whispered to herself, "Sorry, but I actually *am* human," more times than she cared to count.

"*Aren't all of you dragonkin?*" Ruri questioned, but she was met with some hearty laughter and an amused answer from one of the women.

"Dragonkin, with their superior intelligence and mana, wouldn't be doing such menial labor like we are. Dragonkin, whether they be civil servants, soldiers, or those who see to His Majesty the Dragon King's needs, they tend to serve in mostly high-level positions. Since Dragonkin live long lives, they are able to serve long and stable terms in the political sphere."

Another of the women chimed in as well. "Work like this, that anyone who can use magic is capable of, is mostly done by demi-humans other than dragonkin. There are humans that can't use magic, so it's usually work for demi-humans who can use magic."

“Wow, you don’t say. I didn’t know that.”

“Then again, there is also the fact that you need to be a dragonkin to work directly under His Majesty the Dragon King.”

Ruri tilted her head, not really understanding what she meant by that.

“Well, you know, the dragonkin have strong mana, so there are demi-humans who feel intimidated by them. Even more so considering it’s His Majesty the Dragon King, strongest of all dragonkin, who lives here. Those demi-humans couldn’t get much work done if they spent all their time feeling out-of-sorts, so this inevitably led to the Dragon King’s aides all being his own kind. So, by keeping all of his aides dragonkin, it ensures that they are all capable of working together, so that is why you will primarily see them among the upper brass. There are some other races strong enough to hang in there, even given the circumstances, but they are few and far between.”

“I see, that makes sense,” Ruri said in understanding Jade’s sorrowful words about how small animals ran away from him resurfacing in her mind.

“I’m a rabbit demi-human, so I unconsciously shrink whenever I pass by a dragonkin,” said one of the ladies.

“That’s not enough to spook me, but if one stands in front of me? Yeah, no good,” said another as they talked amongst themselves about how imposing the dragonkin were to them.

The two presently detailing their fear of dragonkin were both of fluffy animal races—rabbit and dog respectively. The fact that he loved cute and cuddly things, yet they wouldn’t approach him, made Ruri think that Jade had been born into the wrong race.

“How about you, Beloved? Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes, I’m just fine.”

“I should expect nothing less from the Beloved. I am so envious. If I was of a race comfortable being in front of dragonkin, I would surely aim to be one’s mate...”

“Yeah, I sympathize. Being a dragonkin’s mate is a girl’s dream. My, what I

would give to have one offer me their dragonheart and swear their eternal love to me.” As the lady breathed a tiny, dreamy sigh, her hands holding her cheeks, the other ladies all gave shrill *eeeks* to show their approval to the idea.

“Mate? Dragonheart?” Ruri repeated, the unfamiliar terminology lost on her.

“Do you not know what those mean, Beloved?”

“I can somewhat guess, but would you mind explaining?”

“A dragonheart is exactly what the name implies—a dragon’s heart. And a mate refers to their breeding partner. Dragonkin will give their dragonheart, which they only have access to once in their entire life, to their mate and swear their eternal devotion.”

“They are a race that believes in love with one mate for their entire lives, without ever being unfaithful. I hear there are even those who, if their mate dies, will follow them right after. Any woman would kill to be loved by someone like that, don’t you think?”

“But there must be some examples of couples being at odds and divorcing, right? Not everyone can be with the same person forever, so...”

“No, dragonkin are never unfaithful and will certainly never divorce. I have never heard of a dragonkin doing either. Even the older dragonkin are devoted husbands, so they are the most popular race in terms of marriage partners. Well, they *do* have a fault when it comes to becoming extremely jealous, but that is just because they love their mate that much!” the lady explained with emphasis.

However, another of the ladies replied, “But we practically collapse just when one of them stands in front of us, much less converses with us, so it doesn’t really matter to us anyway.” It was a statement that doused the flames of excitement in one fell swoop.

That was when the image of Chelsie suddenly popped into Ruri’s brain.

Claus’ existence meant the existence of a father, which meant Chelsie had one of these “mates” once upon a time. However, Chelsie lived in that house all by herself and she never once told her about any kind of “mate.” A dragonkin was only supposed to have one mate, and the absence of one meant that there

was a high chance that they had passed away.

It was a hard subject to bring up, but it was very intriguing. As Ruri thought of ways to indirectly ask Chelsie about this the next chance she had to speak with her, she said her goodbyes to the laundry ladies and parted ways with them.

She continued her carefree stroll with no destination in particular in mind. That was when something caught her eye and she stopped in her tracks. She'd found a big tree that she had the intense urge to climb, so she dug her cat claws into the tree and started to inch her way up it.

Her body while in cat form felt far lighter than when she was in human form, which led her to believe that she had increased athleticism as well.

"Oh wow, I did it!" she said to herself, looking over the scenery in satisfaction from atop the tall tree.

Once she had her fill of feeling like a kid again, she descended the tree. Then she discovered a crevice that only her small cat body could pass through, so she did, basking in how it felt to be a cat. The spirits didn't know what Ruri was trying to accomplish, but they delightedly followed after her.

Her snow white fur was starting to get patches of brown grime due to her going between one unfamiliar place to the next, so she quickly cleansed herself using magic.

She lay on a small protrusion on a building and proceeded to sunbathe until two soldiers walked up to her. It appeared as though they didn't notice Ruri was there.

"You hear about the higher-ups going into town looking for someone lately?"

"Oh yeah! I sure did! They were apparently shouting stuff like, 'Find His Majesty's bride!' or something like that, weren't they?"

The word "His Majesty" caught Ruri's ears and made them perk up. *(They're talking about Jade?)* The soldiers continued to converse, not noticing that Ruri was listening in.

"From what I hear, His Majesty has some girl that he's interested in, so the higher-ups are in a frenzy trying to search for her."

“Y’don’t say? So His Majesty finally found someone to take as his mate, eh?”

“Who’s to say? I don’t have the whole picture, but the chances are looking good.”

“Well, since they’ve got people specifically searching for her, it’s pretty obvious that he has. Wow. His Majesty getting married, huh? Hahaha... Makes me wonder where *my* mate is hiding...”

“Mine, too...”

The two soldiers commented to each other despondently before walking off.

“Wow, so Jade has someone he likes, huh?”

That was when a thought suddenly ran through Ruri’s mind. If Ruri wasn’t able to find a way back to her own world, she would continue to live in this world. Logically speaking, she would eventually find a romantic partner, get married and have children of her own.

However, there was no feasible way for her to build that future for herself if she were to remain a cat. It was a matter that could be resolved if she told them she was human, but Claus’ words still made her hesitate.

Ruri sincerely wanted someone she could discuss this with—someone close who knew she was actually a human in cat’s clothing summoned from another world and who she could discuss her future course of action with.

Chelsie was off in that far-off forest, days away from the capital, so she couldn’t have frequent discussions with her. She was also worried that her messages via the spirits weren’t being accurately conveyed, and while writing letters was a viable option, Ruri still couldn’t write their language all that smoothly.

As Ruri worried over not having anyone close to her who knew the truth of her situation, she felt it was about time for her to head back, so she walked back up to the first region of the castle.

She reached the first region and was halfway back to her room, spirits in tow, when someone came walking up from the opposite side of the hall. It was a young man, slightly older than Ruri, with short, vermillion hair, reddish-brown

eyes, and suntanned skin.

He looked familiar to her, but she couldn't put her finger on why. Shrugging it off, she continued walking.

The young man's eyes shot open in surprise once he caught a glimpse of Ruri, and he proceeded to stare at her.

He wasn't someone she'd seen before, so she automatically assumed that he pieced together from her mob of spirits that she was the Beloved. She paid him no mind and tried to walk past.

The young man called out to stop her. "Hey, you."

Ruri turned around. The young man squatted down to her and asked, "You Ruri?"

"Oh, um, yes, I am."

"Beloved, right?"

"Yes..." His reddish-brown eyes stared right through her.

As she sat in the uncomfortable line of his inquisitive stare, the young man asked her in a troubled manner, "By 'Ruri,' you mean *that* Ruri, right?" Ruri mentally quipped in her mind, *Yes, that Ruri. What other Ruri could there be?* However, her mind wasn't prepared for the next words that came out of his mouth. "The same Ruri who was summoned to Nadasha, right?"

"Huh...?" Why did he know that? There shouldn't be anyone in the royal capital that knew that. She had even instructed the spirits to be careful not to tell Jade and the others that fact. So why was it that this young man knew where she came from? And the surprises didn't end there.

"Why are you a cat now? You're supposed to be human, aren't you?"

Once she heard him say that, she could feel herself freeze over. She hadn't even told Chelsie, the only other person who knew she could turn into a cat, that she was living as a cat in the capital. There wasn't a single person around that knew that the human Ruri and the feline Ruri were one and the same—at least, there shouldn't be. So to have some random person come from out of nowhere and guess her identity correctly left Ruri's mind in utter chaos.

“Um, err, well, you see...” Ruri drooped her ears and tail and slowly started to walk backward. She was so flustered that she couldn’t even form words.

The more she thought that she needed to say *something*, the more flustered she became, with the only words coming to her mind being garbled nonsense.

Perceiving Ruri to be in danger from the way she was acting, the spirits floated in front of her to protect her and glared at the young man.

“Stop bullying Ruri, jerk!”

“You guys said that there wasn’t a dragonkin dumb enough to hurt a Beloved, you liars!”

“Liars get punished!”

Panic started to dawn on the young man’s face as he realized that the spirits were perceiving him as a threat. “No, no, we weren’t lying. I wasn’t trying to bully her just now; I was just asking her some questions.”

“But look at how scared Ruri is!”

“Listen, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by it. But anyone would want to ask a few questions if someone who was once a human being just showed up as a cat.”

The young man’s statement made it sound as though he knew her human form, making Ruri ask, *“Do you know me?”*

Relieved that Ruri had decided to engage in the conversation, the young man answered, “Yeah, I do. I’m an intel operative and I was doing some undercover work in Nadasha a while ago. I managed to see you around that time, so I know of you. I also saw you when you got carted off and exiled. Then I told the spirits to make sure to lead you to Grandma’s place. Did Grandma never tell you about me? The name’s Joshua.”

“Joshua...” Ruri repeated, pausing to think for a second. She remembered that Chelsie’s grandson had a name that sounded similar to that.

“Are you Chelsie’s grandson? And by extension, Claus-san’s son?”

“That’d be me. The one and only.”

Now that he mentioned it, Ruri did see the resemblance to Claus more clearly now.

“So you know that I’m a human?”

“Sure do. I was originally off in Nadasha for undercover work, but you guys got summoned here in the middle of that. I was watching you guys from the very beginning, so I know pretty much everything about your circumstances from the second you arrived in this world. And I know that you’re a bona fide human. Truth is, I really did wanna go out and save you, but I had my work to do, so I left that task up to the spirits. I’m sorry I couldn’t step in to save you myself, though. Honest.”

Ruri couldn’t believe her ears—she was blown away that there was someone else who knew of everything that had happened to her, from the beginning... all the way to now.

And if the young man standing before her was the same one who’d advised the spirits to lead her to Chelsie’s house, then she owed him her life.

“No, no, thank you very much. Thanks to you directing them to take me to Chelsie-san’s, I was able to live a very cozy life—entirely free of any hardship. So, really, thank you very much.”

“Grandma can seem pretty uninviting, but I assume she was nice to you?”

“Yes, she may appear uninviting, but she was a great and kind caretaker.”

“Thank goodness for that.” The corners of Joshua’s lips curled into a smile. He firmly pet her head then gave it a few gentle pats.

(I had thought that I was very unlucky to be brought to this world, but I’ve actually been extremely lucky. I’ve been getting help every step of the way this whole time.) Running into such warm and generous people was the greatest stroke of luck that Ruri could have asked for.

True, the help they gave her had much to do with her being a Beloved, but, on the other hand, she could’ve been captured by malicious people trying to use her for their own gains—by a nation like Nadasha, for instance. If she had come to this strange and unfamiliar world and been fed lies and manipulations, then she probably would have taken it all at face value.

All that could be said was that she was truly lucky.

The more she considered her narrow escape, the harder it was to contain her anger toward the Nadashians who'd brought her to this world. (*No, they can't get away with what they did...*) Ruri thought, close to fury.

"So, anyway, why were you a human back in Nadasha but a cat here now?"

"Oh, yes, about that..." Ruri began to explain about the bracelet that turned her into a cat, about running into the street ruffians once she reached the royal capital, and about how she was forced to visit Claus as a cat because she ran into the same thugs the following day.

"Sounds like you had quite the ordeal. Public security in this nation is pretty good compared to some, but that doesn't mean those types aren't lurking around. I'm glad you made it to Dad's safely, though. Otherwise, who knows what would have happened to the royal capital just because of a couple of hoodlums?" Joshua glanced over at the spirits. They were all gung-ho about attacking Joshua up until a minute ago, but now that he was having a calm conversation with Ruri, the spirits had quelled their anger and became docile.

"Um, Joshua-san? I do have a favor to ask of you."

"Just 'Joshua' is fine. Probably a custom where you're from, but no need for strange suffixes here. We'll just keep it casual. Anyway, what is it?"

"I'd like it if you were to keep me being a human a secret. I haven't told Jade-sama or Claus-san yet..."

Joshua cocked his head in confusion. "Why's that? Is it because everyone already thinks that you're a cat?"

"That's right. I had initially planned on telling them that I'm a human right away, but Claus-san, you see..."

"You mean Dad?"

"He said that he was glad that I wasn't a human Beloved... So I thought that I might be treated poorly here if I told him I was a human. I couldn't find it in myself to do so."

"Did Dad really say that?"

“He did.”

Joshua looked as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Ruri didn't want to believe either that someone as hospitable and kind as Claus would change his attitude toward her upon learning she was human, but she had no other option but to play things safe to protect herself. She was alone and vulnerable in the royal capital without Chelsie around.

“I don't know what Dad meant by saying something like that, but Dad isn't the kind of guy who discriminates just because someone's human. Well, there are people who belong to the 'dragonkin are superior' camp, but that's really only a small handful and Dad isn't one of them, so I'm pretty sure he wouldn't say anything even if you *did* tell him. I mean, he'd be taken aback sure, but...”

“Hmm...”

Ruri shared Joshua's sentiments. She hadn't heard Claus say anything derogatory concerning humans since that day, and Jade would likely be understanding if she explained the situation to him. She didn't peg either as being the sort of narrow-minded people who based their attitude toward someone on their race, and it was probably a good idea to hurry and speak to them before this went on for much longer and got even more difficult... But a tiny sliver of worry still remained.

It was *because* they had built up such good relationships that the idea of them turning against her frightened her so much.

“Well, you can tell everyone once you feel sure enough that no one will freak out, alright?”

“So you'll keep my secret?”

“I mean, seems like Dad is the one to blame for all this in the first place. Best for you to say something when you're most comfortable, yeah?”

“Mm-hmm, thank you, Joshua,” said Ruri. He ruffled her ears with playful roughness but looked at her with a gentle gaze.

He told her he'd been summoned to the royal office, so she headed down with him. When they came inside, they saw Claus and a clearly exhausted Jade

working. Ruri used her feline jumping abilities and hopped onto Jade's desk to get a better look at his face.

"Jade-sama, are you all right? You're not looking so well."

"Yes, I'm fine, nothing's the matter." Jade unfurrowed his tense brow and gently stroked Ruri's fluffy little head. The small smile on Jade's face brought an answering one to Ruri's as she stood and let him pet her to his heart's content.

Opposite the two of them, deaf to the world in their heartwarming moment, Claus handed Joshua a report which made the young man shout aloud.

"Aw c'mon! It doesn't have to be me that does it! 'Sides, that's diplomat's work anyway!"

"You are the only one who doesn't have his hands full right now. You're perfectly capable of handling diplomatic matters, aren't you? We certainly cannot send an inept escort to meet with the person who might be His Majesty's future wife."

"But we still don't know it's her for sure, right?"

"Enough backtalk; just get to it."

Ruri turned her attention to Joshua, who was grumbling with displeasure, and asked him, *"Is something the matter? ...Jade-sama's future wife, you said?"* Jade gave a sidelong grimace to the wall at Ruri's question while Claus explained.

"We have been searching for the girl His Majesty was... *smitten* with at first sight, whom he met in the city, and we have had reports that a girl who matches her description has been carted off to a certain nation to be a slave. So, to solve this, we are sending Joshua over to meet and pick up the girl in question."

Someone had a strong reaction to Claus' explanation—but it wasn't Joshua, it was Jade.

"Who are you saying was '*smitten at first sight*'? I simply said that I thought she was interesting; that's all."

"The elders are the ones saying that and the ones conducting the search," Claus replied, prompting Jade to breathe a heavy sigh. "Well, regardless of

whether or not she becomes your wife, a citizen of the Nation of the Dragon King was abducted and taken away by slave traders, so we are obliged to help them. Just like you said, we don't know whether she actually is the right girl until we get His Majesty's confirmation, so just make sure to keep any careless comments to yourself," Claus warned Joshua.

"Yessir. Aye, aye, sir," Joshua said sarcastically. He gave in and nodded, though his impatience with this task was written all over his face.

With that put to rest, Jade stood and picked Ruri up. "Taking a break," was all he said as he exited the office, Ruri in his arms, and headed toward his private quarters. It was a place Ruri had never entered before.

As one would expect from the private quarters of a room used by Dragon Kings of yore, the room was luxurious and extravagant. Ruri looked around with extreme interest. In stark contrast, the bedroom connected to the parlor was decorated in darker colors, giving it a more subdued atmosphere. Ruri thought it better suited Jade's personality.

Jade placed Ruri on the bed and began to undress.

Ruri panicked and turned around.

In Jade's eyes, Ruri was simply a cat that was capable of speech, so he wasn't hesitant about changing in front of her. It was an act that was extremely bad for Ruri's heart.

After Jade had changed into some simple loungewear—a shirt and trousers—he once again lifted Ruri up, climbed into bed, and lay down.

"Huh? Wha? Jade-sama?"

"I've been too tired to finish work recently. You're soft, Ruri. Touching you helps relax me."

His remarks bordered on sexual harassment, but again, to Jade, Ruri was just a cat. She tried to offer some half-hearted resistance, regardless.

"Just so you know, I am technically a nubile young girl..."

"Don't worry; I'm not into cats like *that*."

She wondered what Jade would do if she were to tell him now that she was

actually a human. The reasons it was difficult for her to come clean were stacking up.

It wasn't very long before Ruri heard deep, regular breaths and looked at Jade's face—his eyes were closed and he was fast asleep. He had Ruri firmly in his clutches, and she couldn't really move. Soon, she reluctantly gave up on escaping his grip. Instead she watched Jade's surreally beautiful face as he slept beside her and started to think.

(So Jade has someone that he likes...) She recalled the conversation she'd overheard the soldiers having earlier. She'd thought their talk was just baseless rumors. However, it didn't seem to be a rumor—it seemed to be fact.

Well, since Jade was a very eligible man, it didn't seem unlikely that he might have a person that he liked—or even a wife or two. She simply never considered Jade would have other women on his mind since he always came to Ruri when he had spare time, but seeing as how he was the Dragon King, it'd make sense that he was in high demand among the ladies. His reputation was good as well, from what she'd gathered. Jade's reign as king was the very embodiment of peace, and his political decisions were said to be wise. She'd never heard even a single person voice contempt for him. Despite being their king, he was always friendly with his vassals and had a very charming and affable attitude.

Jade was fulfilling his role as king with flying colors, so it was silly to think that he *wouldn't* have a girl he was romantically inclined toward.

As if to force these disheartening musings away, Ruri nestled next to Jade and fell into a somber slumber.



It was before dawn, in the wee hours of the night, when Jade suddenly woke up. Sensing a presence other than his own, he turned to his side to investigate. There he found Ruri curled up and sound asleep, which brought a tender smile to his face. He ran his hand gently down her back, and his fingers were met with the delightful sensation of her soft, downy fur.

Poking at her nose caused her whiskers to flinch and twitch. Jade held back his laughter at this display of reflexes so as to not wake her. Though it seemed

like no amount of poking would be waking her up anytime soon—she was fast asleep. Jade took the opportunity to take a long look at Ruri's innocent, sleeping face.

He just watched her, which was all it took to bring an incredible sense of peace to his heart.

Jade had never thought that he would ever get to sleep next to a tiny animal, seeing as how he was a dragonkin, until Ruri showed up at his doorstep. In fact, he still couldn't believe his luck. He'd dreamed of touching an animal's soft and cuddly fur, but since dragonkin were so powerful, any animal that so much as sensed a dragonkin's presence would turn tail and run before it could even be *approached*—much less *touched*.

When Jade heard that the Beloved was a cat, he'd been afraid that he would freak them out just like every other animal he'd ever come into contact with. The Nation of the Dragon King would finally have a Beloved, but it would have been for naught if Jade scared them so much they didn't want to stay in the castle.

He'd worried over how to handle the situation, but contrary to Jade's concerns, he was met with a Beloved who was relatively calm around him—he was met with Ruri.

Her eyes had twinged a little fearfully, but it was the fear of being suddenly brought to an unfamiliar place and being surrounded by unfamiliar people. That factor aside, Ruri had seemed unfazed by Jade. She neither tried to run away nor was she afraid even while surrounded by dragonkin.

She even granted him permission to touch her.

Touching a cat for the first time was an experience that he'd never forget. And it was hard *not* to find Ruri cute when she squinted her little eyes in delight at being pet, still completely calm and unfazed by his presence. Not to mention that being with her felt extraordinarily soothing, probably due to his wavelength being compatible with her's to a degree that was very nearly frightening.

He limited how much time he spent with her out of a desire to give her space, but when he learned that Ruri felt just as comforted by his presence as he did

by hers he was absolutely elated—all the more because he found *everything* about Ruri to be so adorable.

He thought to himself ruefully that he was acting like a sentimental old man doting over his first grandchild.

Disappointingly, it seemed that Ruri wanted little, and despite Jade's best efforts to spend his wealth on her, she wasn't willing to be spoiled—which didn't sit well with Jade. She wouldn't even play with the toy he toiled all night to make for her, despite him so badly wanting to see Ruri playfully pawing at it. Nevertheless, seeing her snow-white fur and wafting tail as she slept beside him was cute enough.

He could watch her like this for hours on end.

Although closed now, her eyes were like jewels—a beautiful shade of lapis lazuli blue. As Jade thought of this comparison, he was suddenly overcome with a case of *déjà vu*. He felt as though he had seen similar eyes somewhere before, but where exactly...?

Jade desperately turned his mental gears until a memory surfaced.

(Aah, the girl those thugs were chasing...) He'd been more focused on her hair color when they met, but as he thought back on it he remembered that her eyes had been just as beautiful as Ruri's.

Once he started likening her to Ruri, he suddenly found himself a little worried over the girl's whereabouts. The same girl who might've been taken out of the country and sold off by slave traders. Jade knew that he had to act quickly in order to save her.

However, that wasn't Jade's sentiment as an individual, it was from his consideration for his people as the king of the nation. He had been interested in the mystery girl at first, but now there wasn't a soul around who moved Jade's heart more than Ruri did.

(Well, I guess I just have to leave it to Joshua, then.) Jade thought, reminding himself that they were already carrying out all the steps necessary for her rescue. Then he resumed his sweet slumber by Ruri's side.

Chapter 18: Starting Work

(I don't think I'll be able to last much longer...) Ruri thought, practically agonizing as she reflected on her past actions.

It seemed Jade had developed a taste for sleeping with the comfort of Ruri's fluffy fur ever since the first night. He'd taken to resting with Ruri on every possible occasion.

Not only that, but in an attempt to get Ruri to stay by his side as much as possible, Jade had a small cat bed placed in the royal office. Though, the bed saw little use as she would sit atop Jade's lap more often than not.

She normally reverted back to human form when she was in her own rooms, but due to these recent developments, she found herself remaining in cat form more often than not since she didn't know when Jade might come calling for her. Even in her human form, she kept the bracelet on her person at all times so she could turn back into a cat at a moment's notice.

Being by Jade's side nearly all the time, and his lovely mana wavelength, she deviated from her original plan of learning how to live in this world and started living an idle life of mostly sleeping and eating. At this rate, she was going to become a hopeless cat... no, a hopeless *case*, so she finally set out to correct her lackadaisical lifestyle.

"...Okay, what'd you wanna do again?" asked Joshua, in the midst of preparations to head to another nation. She seemed to be somewhat inconveniencing him, but Ruri had no one else she could depend on. Joshua was the only person who knew Ruri was actually a human and was the only person she could confide in.

"Well, I'd like to work, if possible..."

"You do realize that you're a Beloved, right? What're you gonna do if something happens to you? The state has got you covered for anything you might need, so you don't have to work. You can just kick back and take it easy.

Much like I'd like to do, in fact. Geez, I'm actually jealous."

"I want proper work so I can earn money to live on my own one day. My entire reason for coming to the royal capital was to consider my options for the future, so if Chelsie-san ever finds out that I've just been loafing about, I can't even begin to imagine how angry she'll be at me..." Just thinking about it was enough to make Ruri shudder.

"Well, Grandma *is* pretty darn scary when she's mad, I'll give you that," Joshua said in genuine agreement, clearly speaking from personal experience.

"But, here's the thing. His Majesty is gonna be worried sick if he can't find you. So how are you planning on explaining this? You still haven't told him that you're a human, so you can't just go up and tell him, 'Oh and by the way, I'm off to go earn a living.'"

"I'll be fine so long as I'm not absent for very long. Normal cats wander around on their own all the time, don't they? There are times when I explore the castle and I'm away from Jade-sama, you know."

"Yeah, but still..."

"Please! You're my one and only hope!" Ruri continued to beg the hesitant Joshua and eventually managed to win him over into helping her secure a job.

And so...

"Hello and welcome!" Ruri landed herself a job working at a diner belonging to one of Joshua's acquaintances one town over from the royal capital. She had Joshua provide her with a wig to cover up her hair since it stood out the most. With the wig on her head, she went about her duties as normal. Since her disappearing for hours on end would cause a huge uproar at the castle, she limited her working time to just the lunch hour rush.

Running the establishment was a former employee at the house of one of Joshua's acquaintances, who'd retired from his housekeeping duties due to age and started the diner with the help of his daughter and son-in-law.

"Wow, Ruri, your work ethic really is a lifesaver. I heard you'd only be with us for a short time, but I really would like you to work here indefinitely," said the daughter of the diner owner.

“I’ve always dreamed of doing this sort of work, so I find it really fun,” said Ruri in reply. She’d actually always wanted to work in a cafe, but a diner was close enough.

She’d gone to so many part-time job interviews in the past, but there would always be one thing stopping her once she got there—Asahi.

Her having to pick places with few job openings because she didn’t want to work with Asahi might have been partially to blame, but they would always pick Asahi over her, without fail. Despite consistently landing the jobs Ruri wanted, Asahi would turn each one of them down because she wouldn’t get to work alongside her, which only served to fill Ruri with further rage.

The only part-time work that Ruri had been able to get in her world was due to her mother pulling strings to get her some behind-the-scenes work at her modeling gigs. It wasn’t really the kind of work that Ruri had her heart set on, but your average student socialized a ton, which meant no amount of spending cash was ever truly enough—the more cash, the better! Plus, while it wasn’t the type of job Ruri ultimately hoped for, the thought of Asahi never showing up made it the most comfortable workplace imaginable for Ruri.

Asahi normally captured the interest of anyone and everyone around her, but for some odd reason, when she was around people involved with her mother, those people would invariably prioritize Ruri—it didn’t seem to matter that Asahi had been using Bewitch magic. Back then, since Ruri didn’t know about Bewitching magic, she simply thought that her mom’s superior charm kept them from Asahi’s attraction, which made her lament her own lack of charm. Doubts came to Ruri’s mind—Chelsie said that anyone without an immunity to magic would be strongly affected by Bewitching spells, so why did it not work in that particular case?

That was when Ruri suddenly remembered something. She remembered that Bewitch magic wouldn’t work on people with strong mana or against people who already had Bewitch magic cast upon them by someone with stronger mana than their own.

(Huh...?) That jogged her memory of something Chelsie told her—that possessing mana was hereditary and that those with strong mana were more

likely to give birth to children with equally strong mana.

(*Huh?*) This was all jogging Ruri's memory even further about her grandfather—her mother's father—who'd drilled outdoor survival skills into her. He never had a shortage of anecdotes from his soldier days, like him charging through a pack of enemies, deflecting their bullets and wiping them out all by himself—or him knocking down a giant tree with his one bare fist.

Ruri had always thought that those were just wild stories, but they would be simple tasks if mana was involved...

She also remembered her mother and grandfather talking to themselves a lot. They would stare at and talk to the air, so much so that it was difficult to believe they were talking to themselves. Ruri's grandfather would often say to her, "Still no?" but her mother would answer for her with, "Not yet." The two then disappointedly looked off into a random direction.

Ruri would always try and focus her own eyes, to see if there was actually something there, but she would find nothing, which simply made Ruri scratch her head. The spirits that were always by her own side popped into her head. While they weren't with her right now, as to not get in the way of her work, they were keeping an eye on her from afar. (*No, no, no. There's no way... There's no possible way...*) Ruri felt like she'd taken a step into the gateway of truth.

She desperately tried to shake the thought from her head. But the more her mother and grandfather's unusual behavior came to mind, the less she was able to deny. That being said, with no way to confirm anything at the moment, Ruri decided to give up thinking about it. In a way, it was a bit of a relief. She was sure that she had just suddenly gone missing in her world and that her mother and grandfather were probably worried about her. However, with this new idea in mind, they might know that Ruri wasn't involved in any sort of kidnapping or accident, at the very least. Well, she guessed she had been involved in a kidnapping in a certain sense...

There was even a possibility that they knew what had happened, that she was in another world and that they might never see her again. And while they may never see each other again, this knowledge put Ruri somewhat at ease.

She knew that she was worrying them, but she also now knew that she wasn't making them sad. After all, she was brash and tenacious enough to live anywhere, even another world—these were traits she got from her mother and grandfather. No doubt the two were confident that she would make everything work out.

As Ruri thought that, she could feel herself freed of one more regret about her world.



From that point on, Ruri worked at the diner almost every day.

Jade would ask her where she was going on her way out, but she managed to cover her tracks convincingly enough.

As soon as she left the royal capital she would take off her bracelet, return to human form, put on the brown wig Joshua had prepared for her, and commute to the neighboring town. She would enter the diner and order the spirits to keep their distance from her.

Ruri found serving the customers to be a fun experience. Especially because beast people of all sorts visited the diner, she had a blast just people watching.

Ruri's duties included taking orders and bringing out food.

However, one day, when she was assigned to make the workers' own lunches, she made hamburgers and French fries because she had a strong hankering for them. She also made crepes filled with fresh fruit for dessert—both dishes bowled everyone over. They were so well-received that they asked if it was okay to sell them in the diner proper, to which Ruri agreed.

Human, demi-human, and beastman alike ordered the hamburger and French fry combo, and it became the shop's number one best seller. And after telling them that crepes could be wrapped in paper and eaten while walking, they started selling them as take-out, turning them into a second big hit among both men and women.

But, copying a runaway hit was the way of the world, especially the business world.

A hamburger and fries was nothing more than beef between two slices of bread with fried potatoes, and a crepe was just a mixture of flour, milk, and egg rolled over fruits. They were items that anyone could make easily, so the imitations proceeded to roll on in.

The end result was shops specializing in hamburgers and crepes everywhere. Instead of being disappointed, Ruri felt admiration for their shrewd business senses. Although a massive influx of people did come seeking these products, they started to thin out the more easily accessible these goods became, and it was no time until the boom had completely subsided.

Ruri fancied the idea of whipping them up some Japanese cuisine since things had gone this far, but this world unfortunately lacked soy sauce and miso. She didn't know how to make them either, so she probably had to shelve those plans.

The main staple of this world's diet was bread. According to the spirits, there was something akin to rice here as well, but it rarely circulated in the Nation of the Dragon King. Even so, Ruri desperately wanted to get a hold of some one day.

The Nation of the Dragon King was home to several races, all with their own unique cuisines. Many new dishes had been invented from incorporating the good qualities of each, meaning that they were a wellspring of culinary techniques and ingredients compared with other nations. She considered herself lucky to have come to the Nation of the Dragon King based solely on the food. After all, living off of lousy food would be agony itself. Although there was an extremely diverse selection of cuisine in this world, she couldn't create any truly Japanese dishes without miso or soy sauce.

Ruri had always been able to cook well enough to sustain herself, but she wasn't capable of making new or complicated dishes. She wasn't a professional chef, and this inability discouraged her greatly. She gave up on the whole creating dishes angle. Plotting any kind of get-rich-quick scheme by using cuisine from outside this world wasn't going to work—things just weren't that easy here. She would make dishes if she felt like she wanted to eat them, but she most likely wouldn't make them with the intent to sell. Instead, Ruri quietly focused on busying tables.

“Hey there, Ruri, you gonna be making us some new food?”

Ruri smiled wryly upon hearing the question. The man had been a regular customer even before she introduced the hamburger.

“No, I don’t think so. And I’ve decided to keep it to just worker lunches if I do.”

“Dang, I’m sorry to hear that. I got excited thinking maybe we’d have another great dish like your hamburgers soon.”

“Well, we’ll see how the wind blows...” She had no plans on being a chef, so chances were that she wouldn’t be cooking anything else for the diner.

“I’ve never seen dishes like yours before. Are you not from the Nation of the Dragon King, Ruri?”

“I’m not. I’m from somewhere far away from here.” Ruri was quite literally *worlds* apart from them, so never-before-seen meals were par for the course.

“Do you live here?”

“I commute from the royal capital.”

“I see, I see. ...Aah, speaking of the royal capital, word has it that a Beloved showed up, but do ya know anything seeing as how you hail from there?”

“M-Me? Not a thing.” Ruri’s heart skipped a beat, but she put on a smile to hide her reaction.

“That so? Too bad. It’s what everyone’s talking about, in and outside of town, but no one has any solid information.”

“Is it that fascinating a subject?” She was here to work incognito, so, while they knew who Ruri was superficially, they probably wouldn’t be interacting with her if they knew she lived in the castle.

“Well, of course it is! This is a Beloved we’re talking about. The Nation of the Dragon King hasn’t had a Beloved in such a long time that we don’t even know what it’ll be like to have one around. That’s why I can’t help but be interested. Whenever a Beloved is around spirits gather and help the soil prosper. But that isn’t all; they’ve got their downsides, too.”

“Downsides?” Ruri gave it some thought, but she couldn’t come up with anything that could be construed as a *downside* per se.

“Just saying, being loved by the spirits has its ups and downs.” Ruri looked confused at this statement, so the man continued explaining. “The spirits *really* treasure their Beloveds. More than one nation has met their end from hurting a Beloved.”

Ruri had seen enough to know she couldn’t brush off the man’s comment about spirits destroying nations as hyperbole. His dead-serious expression also helped sell the point, but Ruri had seen the spirits react drastically to danger befalling her, and Chelsie had warned her up and down to keep the spirits under check.

She knew her hold on them had kept them from any real violence so far, but it was just so hard to imagine them causing that much destruction.

“Also, spirits are absolute entities. I hear there are some Beloveds that use the fact that other people won’t oppose spirits to their advantage and start getting too big for their britches. Like, they’ll overestimate their own abilities and start launching wars against other nations. There was once a Beloved, a human one, who tried to mess with the Nation of the Spirit King and, well, the Nation of the Spirit King had a Beloved of their own that was even more powerful, so they ended up getting hoisted by their own petard...”

Spirits would unconditionally lend their powers to Beloveds just like they did for Ruri, no matter their motives, so there were bound to be some Beloveds with designs on world conquest.

“Not all human Beloveds are like that, of course, but I gotta say I’d like to know what kind of Beloved we have. It’s possible that the Nation of the Dragon King could get dragged into something we shouldn’t.”

“Yes, fair points...” Despite being one herself, Ruri objectively realized something—that a Beloved was like a person carrying around the football to the nuclear bombs known as “spirits.”



With the lunch rush past them and the end of the work day drawing nearer,

the daughter of the diner owner called out to Ruri.

“Hey, Ruri, dear? Would you mind coming with me to do some shopping? I might send you to go do some errands later, so I want you to have an idea of where the shop is.”

“Yes, of course,” Ruri replied with a nod, taking off her apron and going out to shop with the woman.

This city that neighbored the royal capital served as a passage for people heading there, so it was pretty big in its own right. Also, since lodgings in the capital were fairly expensive, there were many people who would stay at a place close to the capital and commute.

This city had a lot of shops—not to the extent of the royal capital proper, but still a lot. For someone who only made round trips from the castle and the shop on foot like Ruri, she could easily get lost if she didn’t watch herself. So she committed the path to memory while the daughter explained what they were there to get.

As they walked the city, a shadow was suddenly cast on them from high above. The shadow paused there for a split second before speedily traveling along. Ruri curiously looked overhead. She didn’t find an airplane flying through the skies but a lifeform with a gigantic frame. It was the same form that she had seen countless times when Chelsie transformed—the dragonkin’s dragon form. Several more dragons followed soon after and Ruri looked in the direction they had come from. There she found a tall, rocky mountain visible even from where they stood a town over—the same mountain housing the castle. The dragons appeared to have flown from there.

They were most likely patrol soldiers. They had transformed into dragons and gone on to patrol the area around the capital, which also helped serve to keep the neighboring nations in their place since one look at these gigantic creatures was enough to deter almost anyone from advancing.

While there were people foolish enough to try in spite of that, their presence still served as a deterrent to bandits and the like. It was thanks to them, in fact, that the area surrounding the royal capital was extremely safe.

“Never stops being a feast for the eyes, huh?” commented the daughter,

looking at the sky with her hand shading her eyes. Ruri nodded in agreement.

As she watched the giant bodies fly across the sky Ruri was enchanted anew by her fantasy surroundings.

“So Ruri, have you gotten used to living here yet?”

“Huh?!”

“You know, you were living out in the forest for a while, away from the royal capital, right? That’s way different from big-city life, so I’m sure it’s been all sorts of disorienting, yeah?”

“O-Oh... yeah. Sure has...” Ruri stammered, thinking that she’d meant “gotten used to living in *this world*,” which made her heart stop for a second until she realized she was jumping to conclusions. “Hmm, it’s a completely different way of life for sure. In the forest, just buying things is a whole ordeal, but here, you can go out and buy what you need right away.” Ruri told her about one of her past episodes where the cake she was about to eat got eaten by someone else and that she was so far away from a replacement that she’d tearfully accepted her fate.

The woman chuckled. “The ease of getting what you need *is* one of the main perks of living in a city, yep. And the royal capital in particular has goods from all over. Even this city has an abundance of goods, since it’s right on the way to the capital.”

“The fact that I can eat sweets whenever I want is very appealing.”

“I don’t blame you. That’s important for us girls,” the owner’s daughter emphatically agreed with Ruri, clearly a fan of sweet things herself.

In the middle of the conversation, Ruri felt someone bump into her back.

“Oh, sorry about that...” Ruri wasn’t the one who bumped first, but she apologized regardless, figuring it was only polite since she was the one standing in the middle of the walkway, chatting and blocking the flow of traffic. She turned around to see who it was who’d bumped into her.

Ruri stood silent for a second, and just when she realized she’d seen their faces somewhere before, the memory resurfaced and the muscles in her face

tensed. It was them. It was the pair of creeps she'd run into as soon as she arrived in the capital.

"Grk..." They seemed to notice Ruri as well, their eyes shooting open before their lips curled into devious smirks.

"Well, well. If it ain't the li'l girly we ran into a while back!"

"Us runnin' into you out here feels like fate, don't it? *Eh?*"

"No, no. Doesn't feel like that in the slightest, sir!" Ruri replied, frantically shaking her head as if to say, "Not on your life!"

The men started to inch toward her for whatever reason, and Ruri followed suit by inching her way back. Although she wanted to do an about-face and hightail it, she unfortunately was there with someone else. She couldn't just run off and leave her.

"Acquaintances of yours, Ruri?"

"Uh, no, not exactly, erm..." Ruri stammered, at a loss as to how to answer this question. As her mind spun frantically, one of the men plopped his hand on Ruri's shoulder, causing Ruri to shiver at the unpleasant surprise.

"Hey, don't freak out now. We ain't gonna do anything to you no more."

Ruri wasn't about to believe that.

As she stared up at him, full of fear, the other man proudly informed her, "That's right. We're both reformed thanks to the good sir, after all."

"Good sir?"

"Yeah, the good sir in black from head to toe."

Once she heard them mention someone in "black from head to toe," it evoked the image of the man dressed in black clothes who'd shown up after she'd defeated the two men standing before her. It was the same suspicious man who'd been fascinated by Ruri's hair.

"Once you did us in, the good sir threw some coin our way. Along with a warning not to pull stuff like that again, that is."

"At first, we were pretty steamed and didn't see how some *pocket change*

was gonna help, but after a few days, he even helped us find jobs. So now, we're living on the straight and narrow. And it's all thanks to him." One man went on to earnestly commend the fact that kind people still existed in the world while his partner nodded at this observation in a commendable manner.

The two looked oddly satisfied—content, even—with mellow expressions on both of their faces.

Seeing that helped, and while Ruri still wasn't ready to completely drop her guard, it *did* help settle her down a few degrees.

However, the man's next sentence made her eyes go wide, wiping her mind of all thoughts of wariness.

"So if you *did* do something, you need to hurry up and apologize."

"I... excuse me?"

"C'mon, the good sir's kind, so I'm sure he'll forgive ya."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

The two men gently admonished Ruri and looked at her with somewhat warm eyes—it was almost as if they'd both attained some sort of enlightenment.

"The good sir said that he was looking for you. A guy who said he was one of his envoys came by asking if we knew where you'd gone, a few times actually."

"If they're using people to search for ya, it's gotta be something pretty major, right? I know it's none too compellin' coming from us, but, missy, crime *doesn't* pay," he said, and left her with a parting remark. "Make sure you apologize, y'hear?" he said before him and the other former street thug walked off.

Ruri was left standing there, momentarily unable to follow the plot.

"Oh my, Ruri, did you do something?"

"No, I haven't done *anything*!" Ruri firmly declared. It was quite the opposite. *She* was the one who had something done to *her* by the two former, apparently, toughs that just walked off.

But all that could wait, as what she was really interested in was the person who was searching for her—that man dressed in black that had seemed so

suspicious at first glance.

While the main thing that she could gauge him on was that he was dressed suspiciously, her wariness toward the mysterious man was starting to swell, nonetheless. He also seemed to be fascinated by Ruri's platinum blonde hair. Those factors made Ruri positive that the man was some sort of slave trader. Even though those two former toughs seemed fond of him and called him the "good sir," that definitely wasn't enough to convince *her*, and she feared what would happen if he were to find her...

As Ruri worried over the consequences of being found by the suspicious man, she proceeded to finish her shift at the diner, return to the castle, and head straight for the royal office where Jade was working.

Since Ruri had been working at the diner incognito, she hadn't been spending as much time with Jade, which was starting to have a noticeable effect on his mood.

When she went to the office to check on how said mood was fairing, she caught Joshua in the middle of leaving. Joshua noticed Ruri and his lips curled into a cheerful and amiable smile. He approached her, squatted down and whispered to her so that no one around would hear, "Welcome back, Ruri. It's good t'see ya."

"Thank you!"

Joshua, the only person who knew that Ruri was a human, also knew that Ruri had just come back from working at the diner.

"How was your shift?"

"It was really fun!" She was physically exhausted but mentally satisfied. Joshua said that she didn't have to work because she was a Beloved, but Ruri much preferred to keep herself active. That wasn't to say she hated lazing about, but since she was finally free of Asahi and in an environment where she was allowed to do whatever she wanted, she wanted to relish this unfettered time. And eating up that time by just lying about would be such a waste. *"I really am glad that I asked you to help me get some work, Joshua."*

"Hmm, personally speakin', I'd be grateful if you were to quit right away, but

it's hard to say that when I see ya this giddy about it..."

"Why are you so opposed to me working?"

"Well, because it's big trouble if anything happens to a Beloved; that's why. I picked a diner because I'm pretty sure nothing dangerous'll happen there, but then again... If His Majesty ever finds out about this, he'll chew me out for sure."

Ruri shared the same sentiments at the whole "if Jade ever found out" part. Putting the bit about her being a Beloved aside, maybe it was because she was in cat form, but she'd noticed that Jade gave her an awful lot of attention and care—perhaps too much.

Though it would be nice if he would simply let her do her own thing upon learning she was a human, seeing as how humans could more aptly fend for themselves, judging from the sense of apprehension she was getting from Joshua, preparing herself to get chewed out alongside him seemed to be the more likely option.

"But Chelsie-san told me to think about how I want to live in this world—not to choose to live like a Beloved. She basically said it was fine for me to look for work in the capital."

"Geez, Grandma, you're *not* helping our case... Listen, I'm just saying that there's no need for you to work because we've got you covered on the essentials. And the other nations' Beloveds are all under those nation's care. Then again, this kinda behavior is pretty typical of you... Anyway, if anything happens, be sure to tell me. But just so you know, I'll be out of the country for a while, so don't go sticking your neck into danger. If anything happens while I'm away, you go straight to Grandma. We clear?"

He was likely terrified of what the spirits would do if something were to happen to Ruri, but Joshua was worried like a big brother for his little sister. If Ruri were in human form right now, she'd probably have a wry smile on her face.

"Yes, sir~" It was just as Joshua said—it was entirely unlikely that she'd face any danger doing some mundane work at a diner. Even though she thought he was being a little too paranoid, she admirably nodded.

“Welp, I’ve gotta get,” Joshua said, petting Ruri on the head one last time before standing.

“Have a good trip. Stay safe.”

“You betcha.”

Chapter 19: Unsettling Rumors

It was early morning and Ruri awakened from her slumber. She immediately found Jade's face right next to hers, which startled her for a moment, but this was a sight that she had finally become used to.

Sneaking out of the comforter, she put her front legs out straight, put pressure down on her paw pads and stretched.

"...You're up, Ruri?" Jade slowly sat up in bed, seemingly awakened by Ruri's movements.

He still looked sleepy, but it didn't keep his face from looking stunning. The groggy Jade was exuding at least thirty-percent more sex appeal than usual. Though bashful, Ruri was finding it hard not to look.

Jade reluctantly rose from bed and began to change out of his sleepwear into his normal attire. Ruri, of course, turned around and waited until he was finished.

They normally received their meals at separate times and places, but Jade seemed to have time today, and when he could spare the time, they would eat together.

But unlike eating by herself in her room, she couldn't just revert to human form, so eating proved a little difficult. Not only was she incapable of using forks or spoons in cat form, she had Jade looking at her the whole time, even while in the midst of eating, so it made for an uncomfortable experience.

Judging from Jade's expression, he thought Ruri eating was the most adorable thing he'd ever seen. Ruri could understand how a cat eating could be adorable, but when *she* was the one being watched, it made eating supremely difficult.

When their meal was over, Jade still had time to spare, so Ruri asked if he could spend it teaching her their written language.

He held a book open in front of Ruri, who sat on his lap, like a parent reading for their child. He proceeded to read the contents of the book aloud, nice and

slowly. It was a children's book that Ruri sometimes studied from.

Jade's deep and well-projected voice was a soothing treat for Ruri's ears as she followed along on the page. Whenever she encountered some text that she wasn't familiar with, Jade would write the word down on a separate piece of paper and teach Ruri with incredible patience. He would present the occasional question and she would answer it. If correct, Jade's mouth would form a gentle smile and he would congratulate Ruri with a scritch on the head, which naturally made Ruri squint her eyes in pleasure.

It was hard for Ruri to put into words, but this all felt extremely *peaceful*. Perhaps the fact that Jade's presence was extremely comfortable played a part, but this was the most at peace that she had felt since coming over to this world.

After a while, Jade closed the book.

"It's about time for me to depart. Will you be coming with me, Ruri?"

"I'll be going out for a walk," she said, hopping off of Jade's lap.

"Oh, alright, then."

As she parted ways with the slightly-disappointed-looking Jade, Ruri slipped out of the castle under the guise of taking a "walk" and headed toward the diner.

"Alrighty, another work day awaits." Every day there had been filled with fun and fulfillment so far, but little did she know that her docile life was about to come crashing down.



Soon after Joshua left for his trip, Ruri headed toward the diner, just like she always did.

She served the rush of customers that came in one at a time, but a conversation that two customers were having made Ruri's eyes widen.

"Huh?! Did you say war?" Ruri found herself accidentally interjecting into their conversation, but the two people speaking didn't grimace in response—instead they explained in detail.

They were traveling merchants who came from a nation further past Nadasha

and were en route for the royal capital of the Nation of the Dragon King. Plenty of these traveling-merchant types would come to the capital since it was a port city with a smorgasbord of merchandise from many countries. The merchants who came to the capital would not only acquire merchandise but news as well. The information these particular merchants had acquired was throwing her heart into chaos.

“That’s right. We came here by way of Nadasha. Y’know, the country on the other side of the forest. Seems they’re buyin’ up a large supply of armaments. That’s gotta be prep for war.”

“Yeah, no doubt about it. We don’t deal with weapons, but they seemed to be asking every merchant that passed by and buying all their stock.”

“Nadasha...”

Not noticing the grim look on Ruri’s face, the merchant continued on. “And I’m pretty certain they’re after the Nation of the Dragon King.”

“Nadasha *never* learns its lesson.” The merchant’s comment was met with hearty chortles, leaving Ruri confused.

Ruri had never personally experienced the ravages of war, but from what she knew of it from books and television, it was an extremely frightening and tragic event, so what was this? Neither of the merchants in front of her seemed nervous or afraid over the prospect of war and instead were chatting and joking around with one another. Their reactions just didn’t line up with a word like “war,” which evoked such tragic images.

“How can you laugh in the face of impending war?” Ruri asked with a hint of criticism in her voice.

The merchants looked at each other before turning to Ruri and proudly explaining. “Well, because it’s technically ‘war,’ but it’s not gonna be much of a battle. The Nation of the Dragon King knows they’re gonna win before they even fight.”

“You from another nation, li’l miss? If you are, then it’s no small wonder why you’re not in the know. Nadasha waged war against the Nation of the Dragon King many times in the past. Every single time, they get pummeled into the

ground.” The merchants laughed, knowing that regular men stood no chance against dragons.

The dragonkin had such sturdy bodies and robust recovery abilities that they could easily withstand being shot with an arrow or two, unlike humans. They also had incredible physical strength and mana, so humans had no hope of winning against them.

The merchants scoffed and said they pitied Nadasha, sarcastically commending them for fighting the good fight in spite of the cold, hard facts. There wasn’t any chance the dragonkin could lose, and Ruri thought of all the dragonkin people she’d come to know with relief. It was only for a moment, though, as she considered the Nadashians...

“It seems that the Nation of the Dragon King will be alright, but the damage to Nadasha is going to be enormous, isn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, it will be, but they’re the ones who went picking fights in the first place. They’re coming to get slaughtered, so they’re probably ready to accept the consequences. Are you a Nadashian, by any chance, li’l lady?”

“No, but I have acquaintances in Nadasha...” replied Ruri as the faces of Asahi and her former classmates flashed in her mind.

The merchants were clearly abashed when they heard that.

“Hey, sorry about all that. We shouldn’t have laughed. You’re probably pretty worried, in that case.”

“...Yes,” Ruri answered with a bit of a pause beforehand. That pause was her questioning whether she was actually concerned over Asahi, a person she had an immense dislike for, and her former classmates, who had set her up to take the fall on false charges. But she put that aside and realized she was indeed worried. After all, she knew that her former classmates’ actions stemmed from Asahi’s Bewitchment and most likely weren’t guided by their true intentions.

Perhaps in consideration for the grim expression on Ruri’s face, the merchants changed the subject.

“Right, d’ya know of the Priestess Princess, young miss?”

For a split second, Ruri's heart jumped in her chest, but she kept it on the inside and shook her head.

"The people there say that the Priestess Princess is supposed to lead Nadasha to prosperity."

Hearing this, another merchant chugged his cup of water, slammed it hard on the table and launched into an objection. "That's obviously a goddamn *lie*! If she makes 'em prosper, she wouldn't make 'em go to friggin' war. D'ya know how many of Nadasha's citizens are pouring into the Nation of the Dragon King right now? Prosperity? Psh, they're on the fast track to ruin, if ya ask me!"

"And it seems that the Priestess Princess is spearheading the war—so forget trying to stop it."

(She's what?!) Ruri almost yelped out this thought, but she managed to hold it in.

"Hell of a Priestess Princess she is. The Nadashians are suffering because of her."

"I agree. When I was traveling here, I saw the refugees flooding in at the border fort. It's probably gonna make His Majesty take action personally, right?"

That made Ruri remember that Jade had been pretty busy and looking very fatigued as of late. He seemed to be in extra need of Ruri's healing in the past few days, with Nadasha probably to blame—the very nation that had summoned both Ruri and Asahi...

(I'm going to assume they cajoled her into doing this by using me as a reason.) Ruri wasn't *absolutely* positive in her assumption, but she was more or less certain. Asahi came from a land devoid of war, so the thought of her proposing it was not only hard to imagine—it was baseless.

That meant that someone had to be putting her up to it.

She thought it was strange—odd that they thought that the mere presence of a single person could bring a whole nation real prosperity. At first, she'd processed it like the common trope in fantasy stories, but now that it was happening in real life, it put things into a different perspective. After she settled

down, Ruri started to think there might be more to this whole “Priestess Princess” thing than met the eye. It was concerning, but she didn’t know what she should do...

Once she returned to the castle after work, she sat on the sofa in cat form and contemplated some things. On one hand, she wanted revenge against the king and all the others in Nadasha, but on the other, she didn’t want to bring her long-awaited life away from Asahi to a crashing halt. Which is why she’d never been tempted to go anywhere near Nadasha again. She would rather jump off a cliff than have to deal with Asahi and the classmates that had framed her, but she wasn’t heartless enough to ignore them after hearing that they might get themselves involved in a war. She felt obliged to help them out of same-world solidarity.

“Maybe I should head over to Nadasha...” She had no intention of getting truly involved; she simply wanted to pop over and check things out.

“Me too!”

“Ooh, me too!” The spirits raised their hands one after another, more raring to go than Ruri herself was, making Ruri’s eyes go wide.

“Huh? You guys want to go with me?”

“Of course.”

“I see, thank you.” The spirits’ tone made her think they weren’t going to take no for an answer whatever she said. Ruri had been hesitant about going on her own, but now that she’d gained so many reliable travel partners, a soft smile appeared on her face.

Since she was going far away, she needed to report in. If a Beloved were to just up and disappear, it would obviously cause a gigantic panic. Although, if she told them that she was going to Nadasha, they would probably ask her why, and she couldn’t explain it to them without also telling them that she was human. If she were too vague, it would raise doubts and Jade would probably insist on coming along with her. Even if it wasn’t Jade himself, he might assign someone else to follow her.

If Joshua were still around, then she could have him devise a way to subtly

relay the message to Jade, but Joshua was unfortunately far away on business.

She had no alternative but to handle things herself, and, since she couldn't explain her reason for going, it seemed likely that Jade would try to stop her if she went to see him directly.

Finally, Ruri reverted to her human form once she returned to her room. She took a pen and paper in hand and decided to write a note to leave behind.

The only problem was that Ruri only knew the bare minimum of the language, even with Chelsie teaching her during the long time that she spent in the forest. Living in the forest meant that she didn't need written language, and Chelsie prioritized teaching Ruri the general rules of the world and how to control her mana. Even when they went out shopping in the city, she'd only needed some basic vocabulary and numbers, so she didn't have grammar instilled into her.

Although Jade had provided her with teachers and she'd started lessons, they'd only gotten to some basic vocabulary as of yet. However, she believed that she could string together her small vocabulary and get the point across. She wrote her letter, returned to cat form, and gave it to a passer-by in the halls, instructing them to deliver it to Jade.

With that task out of the way, Ruri set off for Nadasha.



Jade scanned the intel amassed by his intelligence operatives and racked his brain. "Ugh... Why is that place so infatuated with war?"

Claus made out these mutterings and responded with a wry smile. "Because they are immovably stuck in their ways. Generation and generation again, their mindset remains the same."

Jade sighed deeply. He had honestly lost track of how many times Nadasha had tried to wage war against them. Nadasha was free to start whatever they wanted, of course, but it was honestly a waste of time. When the Nation of the Dragon King fought Nadasha, the former came out completely unscathed. After all, no degree of human strength could overcome that of the dragonkin, and a human besting a dragonkin was considered impossible unless they were a Beloved—that was how stark the divide between their abilities was. Conversely,

it would serve as exercise for the hot-blooded dragonkin soldiers and keep them from tearing the castle up with all their pent-up energy. At least there was almost a silver lining to this mess.

With a divide so great between the two nations' powers, the dragonkin one day ruling the world didn't seem out of the realm of possibility. Dragonkin however, as hot-blooded as they were, possessed docile dispositions that were devoid of any desire for the control or domination of others. While they did have a love of competition and battle, they abhorred pillaging and otherwise harming the innocent because the dragonkin took great pride in being an honorable race.

The entire reason the Nation of the Dragon King was formed was to help protect the slaves who sought help from the dragonkin leader. Monarchies and domination had been of little interest to them from the very beginning.

Jade had become king simply because he was the most powerful of the dragonkin; he never had much attachment to the position of "king." But as long as he *was* king, he planned on carrying out his kingly duties to the letter. That was his plan, but when problems occurred he always wanted to run away.

Day by day, the number of refugees from Nadasha increased. If they were simply being pursued by troops, then he could've just beat them and be done with it. But the situation was more complicated than that, and they couldn't just turn away these refugees who so desperately sought his help.

Jade thought about his options for dealing with this situation and couldn't help but let out a deep sigh.

Seeking healing, he reached over to his lap, but he came to his senses when he felt only air and realized that Ruri was not there. Whenever he grew weary, he would always search for that soft and fluffy white fur. Actually, even disregarding that, lately he found himself always on edge unless Ruri was by his side.

The thought of the elder dragonkin, frantically searching for his "bride," was deeply conflicting for him.

When he'd told them there was a girl he might be interested in, he'd thought that it would help settle them down. He'd been completely off the mark. No girl

he could think of struck Jade as “mate” material at the moment and, more importantly, he valued Ruri more than any of them.

While that stance was fine for the moment, he was going to face real problems going forward—he couldn’t stomach the idea of marriage unless someone with a mana wavelength more compatible with his than Ruri’s appeared. Thinking of the comfort he gained by being with Ruri, he figured that someone showing up like that would be impossible, which worried him a little.

That was when he heard a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Jade curtly responded, signaling for the man outside the door to enter. He handed Jade what appeared to be a memo.

“This is from the Beloved. I was given this and instructed to deliver it to you, Your Majesty.”

“From Ruri?”

“Yes, Sire. They seemed to be in somewhat of a hurry and rushed off elsewhere.” With his delivery completed, the man bowed and exited the room.

“What in the world could this be?” Jade was a little annoyed. If Ruri needed to give him something, she should have just delivered it to him herself. Regardless, he opened the piece of paper, which had been folded into fours, read what was written on the page and frowned. He took his eyes off the paper, massaged between his eyebrows and then looked again. No matter how many times he read it, the words remained the same, and after a short pause, he sprung to his feet.

“Your Majesty?” Claus asked, curious as to Jade’s strange and sudden behavior.

Jade passed the paper over to Claus, his hand seeming somewhat limp.

“Leave. Home. Chelsie. Go Back... Um, what is this?”

“A letter Ruri sent me.”

“This is quite sloppy penmanship. Well, then again, I shouldn’t be too critical considering it was written by a cat.”

The penmanship wasn’t the problem for Jade—it was what the message *said*.

“Leave. Home. Leaving... home. Leaving home! She’s leaving!” exclaimed Jade, clearly flustered.

That was certainly one way of reading the message, but Claus interjected, “Please, remain calm, Your Majesty. We do not know that for sure.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. Have the entire castle searched immediately, top to bottom.” While a full-blown search for one cat might seem ridiculous, the cat in question was a Beloved.

Claus ordered soldiers to conduct a sweep of all regions of the castle, but they were unable to find Ruri. When Claus returned to Jade with that news, he deflated into a despondent slump. Then he straightened suddenly and made as if to walk straight out of the office.

“Please wait, Your Majesty! Wherever are you going?”

“I’m going to look for Ruri myself!”

“How do you plan on searching for her if you don’t know where she is, Sire?” Claus had used spirits to search for her as well, but the spirits did nothing but speak some unintelligible nonsense and wouldn’t tell him clearly where Ruri was. The only thing he’d been able to gather from them was that she wasn’t in the castle. They’d reached a complete dead end.

“I’ll wing it.” If Ruri wasn’t in the castle, Jade had no idea where else to look, but he couldn’t just sit around like a lump on a log with Ruri potentially running away.

“What in blazes dissatisfied Ruri enough for her to leave? If something displeased her, she should have just said something to me,” Jade lamented. To him she’d seemed perfectly content just this morning.

“We still do not know for certain that she has left for good. I see that my mother’s name is written here, so perhaps she simply went to go pay her a visit. I shall write a letter to Mother at once. So, please, I implore you to exercise patience.”

“...Tch.” Jade stopped in his tracks, to Claus’ immense relief. He watched Jade settle down in his chair and gave him an awkward smile.

“It is truly quite rare to see you so perturbed, Your Majesty.” Even Claus was taken aback at seeing the usually calm and collected Jade lose his wits so thoroughly.

Jade himself realized this, and felt somewhat embarrassed. “How can you blame me? I can’t stay calm with Ruri gone.”

“You care a great deal for Ruri—more so than I would have imagined,” Claus said, not sure if the return of someone capable of throwing Jade’s heart into such a frenzy would be a good or bad thing.

Chapter 20: The Truth

A few days had passed since Ruri had up and left the Nation of the Dragon King, and after making a few overnight stops in towns along the way, she found herself in Nadasha—only to be flabbergasted at the state of the nation.

“This is terrible...” When she’d been ousted from Nadasha’s castle, she was tossed into a carriage and sent straight to the forest, so she’d never had a chance to see the state of the royal capital and the towns she passed by again now.

Looking back, Ruri was glad of that. Had she seen their current state of affairs, she would have been filled with dread over being brought to such a ramshackle world and probably wouldn’t have been able to brave the forest the way she had.

The word “terrible” summed up the Nadashian town perfectly.

Despite it being a reasonably big town, the buildings were all in such disrepair that they looked abandoned, and the streets seemed nearly abandoned too. The few people she did see looked lifeless, tired, and emaciated. There were no children playing happily in the streets, no girls gossiping among themselves, no shouting merchants hawking their wares.

She was baffled by how there could be such a big difference between Nadasha and the Nation of the Dragon King when they were so close together.

It had been about two years since she’d been here. Ruri began to recall her life in Nadasha—those few days she spent being taken care of as part of Asahi’s party. If she had seen this awful sight, then she might have known just how blessed those few “normal” days really were. Then there was the way Asahi was treated like royalty by virtue of being the Priestess Princess—the word “thriftiness” wasn’t exactly in her lifestyle’s vocabulary.

Conversely, this town was in such terrible shape that the way people lived within the castle walls seemed downright ridiculous. Despite that, this King was

trying to wage a war. Even someone with almost no knowledge of politics like Ruri thought it was obvious that they had bigger things to worry about.

“Ruri, let’s hurry up,” urged a spirit, but Ruri had been shocked into stillness.

“You, you’re from out of town, aren’t you?” The voice calling out to Ruri blindsided her, making her jump. Ruri turned to find an old woman, who seemed to be about the same age as Chelsie, staring at her.

The old woman seemed exhausted, but, compared with the other even more lifeless people, this old woman’s eyes were still bright with vigor. However, as she came closer to Ruri she limped and tottered.

“I can tell right away from how healthy and energetic you seem. After all, most people here are so famished that they don’t even have the energy to get out of bed,” said the old woman staring off behind Ruri. She followed the old woman’s eyes to see several small children sitting up against a wall. “...Do you happen to have any food?”

“Food?” Ruri repeated and then rushed to open her pocket space, pulling out a bundle of soft cookies from inside. “Here you go.”

The old woman took the bundle, looking relieved, and gave a short yet sweet “thank you” in gratitude. She didn’t eat any herself but instead walked over to the group of children and gave each a cookie.

Once the children had all received a treat, their once emotionless faces lit up with joy and they proceeded to stuff their cheeks with the cookies. Since they scarfed the cookies down, out of fear of someone swiping them, a few of the kids almost choked. As Ruri watched the old woman gently pat the backs of the children with food caught in their throats, she regretted giving her those rather dry cookies instead of something else.

She proceeded to put her hand into her pocket space again and, this time, pulled out a juicy fruit that tasted like a peach and was shaped like a banana. She had stocked up before arriving in Nadasha. She handed one to each of the children and one to the old woman. Content that this new food choice wouldn’t pose a choking hazard, Ruri gave herself a pat on the back for putting her pocket space to good use and stockpiling so many.

As she watched the heartrending sight of the children gobbling down their fruits like it was the last thing they'd do on this earth, the old woman spoke to her.

"Terrible, isn't it? What in the world did we do to deserve this?"

"How did this happen?"

"One day, the state soldiers came down and started taking away all the able-bodied men. With taxes already so high, we were just barely managing to scrape by as it was, but after they took away all the men, we couldn't hold down any sort of living at all anymore. And on top of that, they still ask us to pay the same amount of taxes, as if nothing ever happened! If we didn't pay, they took away our food, and if we complained about their insane requests or tried to fight the draft, then they dispatched us on the spot. All we have left are women, the sick, and huge taxes we are forced to pay. Producing crops only to have them taken away under the guise of 'taxes' leaves us with no hope and no food. We can't survive much more of this." Once the old woman finished speaking, she exhaled as if trying to expel something lodged in her chest.

"And this town isn't the only one affected. What is going on in that king's mind? What is going to happen to this nation?" There was no one around to answer the old woman's listless queries.

Ruri didn't know what had gotten into her, but she started walking toward the open town square. In the square was a well where many people, who seemed to be trying to stave off their hunger with water, all sat.

Water was not what their bodies needed.

As Ruri, clearly an outsider, walked among them, they gave her only brief glances before quickly losing any interest, as if the very act of looking was too arduous for them.

"Ruri?" As the spirits all looked to her in confusion, Ruri stood in the middle of the square and focused. As she did, a bud suddenly sprung up from the soil.

Ruri pumped more and more mana into the bud until it started to grow at a normally-impossible speed equal to the amount of effort she'd put into it, turning it into a giant tree with rich and vibrant leaves. She injected even more

mana and the beautiful tree bore fine fruit.

The townspeople, who once simply stared lifelessly off into space, started to show signs of actual emotions.

Ruri harvested the ripened fruit with wind magic, catching the falling produce with wind and passing them out one by one to each of the impoverished people.

The townspeople stared at her, one after another, in disbelief of Ruri and the lush fruit they'd received. As they took their first cautious bites into the fruits, the sweet juice spreading through their mouths opened the floodgates and they began to scarf them down.

Probably due to the large amount of mana Ruri used to create the tree, by the time she was done passing out the fruit to the people in the square the tree was once again bearing new fruit. Ruri told the people who were relatively able-bodied to share them with the other townspeople and then walked away from the town.

On the move once more, one of the spirits seemed unable to comprehend Ruri's actions and questioned her. *"Why did you help them? None of this has anything to do with you, Ruri."*

"It's fine. Sure, improving the status quo here isn't my job, it's the state's, but it's just... if I just ignored things here, the sight would be stuck in my head and I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. I lived off their backs, albeit just for a few days. I helped because I wanted to get rid of this guilt—as downright self-centered as that may be."

The spirit lamented the unnecessary complexity of the human thought process, still clueless as to Ruri's motivations. Ruri smiled wryly.

She dropped by more towns on the way, handing out food to their inhabitants.

The royal capital of Nadasha, on the other hand, looked the way one would expect the king's city of residence to look—the streets filled with people all dressed neatly in proper clothing. While it couldn't hold a candle to the capital in terms of scale, it was essentially a tourist location, which would have filled

Ruri with excitement—if this were the first place she saw upon arriving.

However, after seeing the state of the towns she'd passed on the way here, she felt discomfort from the radical divide between life in the capital and life in those towns.

In all the towns she visited, there were a lot of children, women, and the elderly, and once she saw the royal capital, she understood why.

There were men lined up in front of the gate into the capital—some seemed tired and some seemed afraid. She turned back into her cat form and eavesdropped, learning that all the people lined up were gathered for the war effort.

“What now, Ruri?” Ruri was stumped when posed with this spirit's question.

Ruri had come back to Nadasha because she wanted to confirm the rumors of a war breaking out, but now she knew they were far from rumors—they were the *truth*. She had never thought that she was capable of single-handedly stopping the war or anything outrageous like that. She was just curious.

The other thing she was curious about was whether Asahi was involved with the war effort, but she didn't know what would come of her finding out. Now she was having second thoughts about coming here on a whim—but too little, too late.

Ruri considered her options seriously for a moment.

“Why not decide after going to the castle and checking things out?”

“That's a good idea. But I don't want to run into Asahi, so we'll go about it discreetly.” With her next course of action set, Ruri slipped through a crack in the outer wall and into the royal capital.



In the throne room of Castle Nadasha the King sat atop his throne.

“How go the preparations for battle?”

The one who answered the King's question was the oldest and highest ranked priest out of all the priests who'd summoned Ruri and the others to this world.

“Everything is proceeding smoothly. The temporary loss of our magic was a frustrating setback, but we told the masses it was a warning from God because of forces who were opposed to the Priestess Princess’ will and that we have exiled them all to the Mystic Forest. I would assume they are nourishment for the many fearsome creatures who dwell there right about now.”

“I was worried about what would happen for a moment, but it was a stroke of good luck that we were able to use exiling them as an excuse. Praise be to the Priestess Princess, yes?”

“Why, yes. Praise be, indeed.” The King and the Head Priest both smirked in an extremely pleased, yet extremely cruel, manner.

Despite some slight changes to the narrative, everything was proceeding as planned for them.

“Although, if I were to list one factor outside our calculations, it would be the Prince being so thoroughly emasculated by the Priestess Princess...”

“It is pathetic that he is ensnared by such weak Bewitchment. Maybe I should send them into war and get rid of the Priestess Princess and the whole lot. A prince can always be replaced, after all,” said the King, speaking of his own son like an expendable commodity. The Head Priest listened to this astonishing statement without batting an eye; he was preoccupied with something else.

“The Priestess Princess as well, Sire?” The appearance of the Priestess Princess, bringer of prosperity, had brought in a massive influx of donations to the church. The Head Priest was not sold on the idea of losing her.

“If we do find it necessary, again, we can just bring in the next one. There is no need for someone with more clout than a King. I have grown weary of her impudence,” stated the King with a furrowed brow. The Head Priest nodded his head, finally convinced.

The King had initially promised special treatment, but her being the Priestess Princess meant that the workers of the castle paid careful attention and paid special respect to her. The Priestess Princess herself seemed to be used to this sort of treatment due to her Bewitch powers, so she accepted it as if it were all normal.

That was likely how she got the castle soldiers to search for her friend. From her perspective, she was only asking for a favor, but the soldiers took it as an official order, with the Prince leading the initiative to carry that order out. That ability, from the King's perspective, was extremely dangerous.

"...In that case, it might've been wise to make the friend of the current Priestess Princess, whom we exiled into the Mystic Forest, the Priestess Princess instead. I looked at our current one and added that extra line, thinking that a 'priestess' should be as attractive as possible with unusual coloring, but I suppose I failed to truly consider my options," the Head Priest said, seriously beginning to fret over his decision.

The King, however, quickly disagreed. "No, that wouldn't have worked."

"Why is that, Sire?"

"Back when she was summoned, while the others were unable to come to grips with the situation and stumbled into our clutches completely dumbfounded, that girl was the only one to try and calmly assess the situation. We need an oblivious fool who will follow our will, not a perceptive intellectual."

"Indeed, the word 'fool' sums up our Priestess Princess quite well. Some would call that 'purity,' but I suppose *that* is a matter of perspective."

"As long as they are easily manipulated, call them whatever you'd like. Nevertheless, if we let her stay at the Priestess Princess' side, she might have bestowed some unwanted wisdom. Eliminating her quickly was the right decision."

"Yes, quite true. In the off-chance that she found out that the 'Priestess Princess' was an idol we created, who never existed in the book of prophecy in the first place, then we would have had a real problem."

(What the hell...?) As Ruri prowled the castle as a cat in her search for Asahi, she found King Nadasha and the familiar, frail old priest. She decided to listen in on their conversation, but what she heard made her stand stock-still in utter shock. *(What did I just hear...?!)*



As Ruri was eavesdropping on the conversations of Nadasha, Joshua had returned to the Dragon King's castle where she had already been absent for several days.

"Aah, finally back home!" Joshua had been carrying out some work outside of his field of expertise as an intel operative. He was relieved to see the familiar halls of the castle.

He still hadn't given his report, which was his final task. Joshua had been getting worked to the bone as of late and he thought it was about time he took a long vacation. He headed for the royal office where Jade awaited him.

"Pardon the intrusion, guys~" Joshua said, entering the royal office extremely casually despite it being the workspace of the Dragon King. Claus had scolded him for that crass habit, but Joshua never showed any signs of fixing it.

Although his tone was casual, he wasn't doing it to make light of Jade at all, so Jade paid it no particular mind and let it pass without comment. Joshua probably wouldn't change no matter what he said.

As soon as the young man entered the room, he was greeted by a sharp glance, making him take a step back out of instinct before he even had the chance to ponder why he was being glared at.

"U-Uh, did I do something?" Joshua timidly asked the person staring daggers into him—Jade.

Almost as if only now noticing that he was scowling from someone telling him, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No, it's nothing. She disappeared after you left on business, but... You're probably not involved..."

Joshua shot an inquisitive glance toward his father, Claus, who was also in the office, but Claus gave him a strained smile and passed Joshua a piece of paper that was atop Jade's desk.

On the piece of paper were a few words in a crooked hand that looked to have been written by a child. Sloppy as they were, he was still able to make out

the words—for the most part.

“Wow, this is chicken scratch.” Although he could make out the words on the paper, he couldn’t decipher the meaning.

“That’s a letter from Ruri.” It appeared that Jade looking somewhat sulky wasn’t just in Joshua’s imagination.

“I, for one, am impressed she managed to write that with a cat paw,” Claus said in admiration as it seemed that his concerns differed from Jade’s.

Joshua knew that Ruri probably wrote this note after turning back into a human. Since Claus didn’t know she was a human, he couldn’t help but picture the strange act of a cat writing a letter.

“Alright, so what does Ruri writing this letter have to do with anything?”

“Ruri left that letter for His Majesty before leaving for somewhere, it seems.”

“Grk, wait, *for real?!?*”

Joshua once again looked back at the paper and written on it was, “Leave. Home. Chelsie. Go Back.”

“...A direct interpretation would be she’s left *home*—i.e., ‘*run away*,’ huh?”

The word “run away” caused Jade to jump and drop the pen he was holding. Seeing that, Claus scrambled to cover up for his son’s loose tongue.

“Fear not, Your Majesty. I am sure she simply *left* for a visit back to Mother’s *home* and will be making her return to the castle soon enough.” Claus shot Joshua a glare that told him to keep his unnecessary commentary to himself.

Jade had only just gotten his composure back. When he’d first received the letter addressed from Ruri, Jade came to the same interpretation and made a huge fuss over trying to find her. All of his court together managed to stop him from doing so and, because the only place Ruri knew was Chelsie’s place, Claus managed to convince him to stay by telling him he would contact her.

That was why Joshua’s slip of tongue was such an issue, because it threw Jade’s heart back into turmoil.

Seeming to pick up on Claus’ hint, Joshua asked Claus a question to smooth

things over.

“So you contacted Grandma, right? What did she say?”

“That she isn’t there as of yet.”

“Do you have any clue where she’d be, Joshua?” Jade asked, appealing to Joshua, but he had no idea where she would go other than back to Chelsie. Well, he actually did have *one* idea, but without any proof, he really couldn’t say it aloud.

“Have you asked the spirits?” Joshua’s question was met with a shrug of the shoulders as Claus explained that they didn’t give them the answer he was looking for.

“I couldn’t ask the spirits that are normally around Ruri because they left along with her, but when I asked the other spirits, they told us that ‘she didn’t want to, but she was curious, so she went to go take a look’—information that neither His Majesty nor I can make heads or tails of. And Mother just replied with a letter that said Ruri would ‘return soon,’ but we cannot tell if she’s saying that with certain knowledge as to where she is. Since it’s Mother, she probably won’t give a straight answer even if we do ask more questions, so we’re at quite the loss...”

Neither Claus nor Jade could decipher the meaning behind Chelsie’s answer. However, it was enough for Joshua to have a good guess of where Ruri had gone and why.

Joshua botched things up, however. He let his knowledge show on his face, which Jade astutely picked up on. He zeroed in on that subtle change in expression.

“Joshua, do you know something?” Jade asked, cutting right to the chase.

He considered trying to make up something on the spot to throw them off his trail, but Jade’s piercing gaze had him pinned down, forcing him to quickly concede. There was also the fact that Jade looked as though he was about to snatch him up by the lapels at any moment.



“I’m not totally certain, but I have a hunch as to where she might be.” Two thoughts had popped into Joshua’s mind—Nadasha, the nation that had summoned Ruri in the first place, and the people summoned to this world alongside her.

Recently rumors of Nadasha inciting a war had taken off everywhere, including with the citizens of the Nation of the Dragon King. She most likely heard the news when she was working in the diner or while out and about. Joshua heard the stories flying around once he got back to the country, so it wouldn’t be too far-fetched to assume Ruri had also. His guess was that she was concerned over the people she came to this world with and went to go check on them—with added incentive because her childhood friend, Asahi, was said to be spearheading the war efforts.

“A hunch will do. Now where is Ruri?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“Joshua!” Jade said in a voice so deep that any small animals in the area would have likely fainted upon hearing it.

However, there stood Joshua. Even faced with Jade looking him straight in the eyes, he replied with a friendly smile and a jovial tone. “Would it be rude for me to ask you not to look so scary, Your Majesty? As much as I would like to spill the beans, I’m unfortunately bound to secrecy per Ruri’s request, so I have to keep my lips shut until I get permission from Ruri herself.”

“I couldn’t give a *damn* about that.”

“Well, it’s a private matter between me and Ruri, so... Wait, please don’t get all jealous at me, Sire!”

Jade looked perturbed that Joshua knew a secret about Ruri that he didn’t know. Joshua felt that he could at least tell them that she’d gone to Nadasha... but at the same time, if he did, they would probably ask him why she’d gone there to begin with.

He could always just make up some random reason, but judging from Jade’s behavior, he seemed likely to head straight over there to pick her up. Joshua couldn’t let the king of his country head over to the very place that was

potentially going to war with them. He decided to keep silent.

“You don’t need to worry, Sire. She may not have gone to Grandma’s place just yet, but if we’re thinking of places Ruri might go, I’m positive that she’ll be dropping by there. I’m fairly sure she’ll contact us after a while, okay? Ruri is competent and has spirits accompanying her, so she’ll be alright on her own. Honest.”

“If Joshua is that confident in his assessment, then I say we wait and see what happens. Fair, Your Majesty? ...Your Majesty?” Despite his casual attitude, his son was reliable when it came to his job, so if he insisted that things would be all right, then there was no reason *not* to believe him. Thinking that, Claus turned to Jade, but Jade sat there stewing in suspicion and silence. “Your Majesty?”

Jade suddenly stood up and, before he could even process that, said, “Nope, I’m going to pick up Ruri.”

“Ah! Wait just a moment, Sire!! You said you’re going to ‘pick her up,’ but from *where*?!” Claus immediately jumped in to stop him.

“She might drop by Chelsie’s, correct? I’m going to wait at Chelsie’s until Ruri comes!”

“That will not do! We are on the verge of war with Nadasha. This is not the time for you to leave the castle.”

“No, I’ve had enough. I’m going to see Ruri.”

“Your Majesty! Joshua, don’t just stand there; stop him!”

“...Hmm, he’s that attached even though he thinks she’s a cat. What would His Majesty think if he knew Ruri was a human?” Joshua murmured to himself, thankfully disappearing into the ether without anyone hearing him.

Chapter 21: True Identity

A considerable amount of time had passed since Chelsie started living in the woods known as the Mystic Forest. Her unhampered, solitary life was peaceful and quiet outside of the occasional visit from her son or grandsons.

The day that broke that mold was two years ago.

Two years was only the blink of an eye to a dragonkin, but the two years that she lived with Ruri left a deep impression on her. When Ruri left for the Nation of the Dragon King, Chelsie kept accidentally making meals for two for quite some time after.

She was finally getting accustomed to living on her own again as of late.

Chelsie was going about another normal day of life out in the forest—until she felt somebody enter the barrier around her property. She was very familiar with their mana, however, and went to the entrance to show her guest in.

Just then, before Chelsie could process the door loudly flinging open, someone ran through the door and dashed straight into Chelsie's arms, causing her eyes to open wide—that someone was Ruri.

"Chelsie-saaaaan!! You have to hear this!" Ruri clung onto Chelsie tight while voicing some rather incomprehensible things at length.

"I swear... The noise never stops when you're around. Well? What's the matter?" Chelsie asked with a sigh as Ruri went on to tell her about the conversation between King Nadasha and the Priest in an excitable manner. "Yes, I ended up finding that out myself."

Chelsie's unsurprised demeanor toward the news left Ruri the surprised one. "'Ended up finding it out'? You mean you already knew, Chelsie-san?!"

Guiding Ruri over to a chair and sitting her down, Chelsie pulled out some tea leaves from the rack and began to prepare a pot of tea. "More or less, yes. I assume you met my grandson, Joshua?"

“Yes, I did.”

“Joshua told me that he investigated the Priestess Princess in Nadasha. He also investigated what the book of prophecy said about her and noticed something odd.”

“Something odd?”

“Yes. He said that despite it being an ancient book of prophecy, it looked relatively new. Specifically, he found clues that led him to believe that the description of the Priestess Princess’ features was added recently. The handwriting was that of the Head Priest himself.”

“Why would they do something like that...?”

Placing the prepared tea in front of Ruri and herself, Chelsie sat across from her, took a sip and began to elaborate.

“King Nadasha wishes to go to war because he wants the land of the dragonkin. And the upper echelons of the church are a den of money-grubbing fiends. When conflict breaks out, the citizens pray for their safety and provide ample donations to the church. That is why they want a war.”

Displeasure toward the king and the priests was showing clearly on Ruri’s face, but she stayed silent and listened to Chelsie attentively.

“But that doesn’t mean that Nadasha is filled with war-hungry people. There were moderates, dissatisfied with internal affairs within the nation and opposed to war. Those forces had been keeping the king and his pugnacious designs in check.”

“If so, why are they going to war anyway?”

“The King and the Head Priest decided to fabricate the existence of the ‘Priestess Princess’ in order to forge ahead with their war efforts. The citizens, impoverished from the war and the tax collection, would hold on to the hope of this bringer of prosperity, thinking that if she endorsed the war then they should go through with it. The Priestess Princess could have been anyone. But since there was a girl with such unusual and attractive features among those summoned to this world, they just settled on her.”

“That was their reason...?” Ruri had predicted that from the King and Head Priest’s conversation to a certain degree, but it still shocked her. Part of her even found it hard to accept, but part of her remained calm enough to voice her doubts.

“In that case, why didn’t they just make someone in their own nation the Priestess Princess instead of summoning all of us? If you’re saying that anyone would have done, then it doesn’t make sense that...”

“They probably wanted a real human summoned to this world to emphasize the fact that they’re someone special. Were it one of the citizens of their own nation, the moderate factions wouldn’t believe them anyway. Plus, someone summoned to this world wouldn’t know a thing about the current status of Nadasha and would be pretty easy to manipulate.”

“...”

This wasn’t the first time that Asahi had embroiled her into a mess. It drove her up a wall, but it was a familiar old story. She was almost used to it.

However, they didn’t need to settle for Asahi—it could have been anyone.

In that case, why did this happen to Ruri? Why was Ruri here when all they’d really wanted was her? Luck just wasn’t in her favor—but that wasn’t a good enough reason to calm the complicated feelings that swelled inside of Ruri.

“May I continue?” Chelsie asked gently, looking in concern at Ruri, who nodded in reply with her head hanging low.

“So, Nadasha deceived this ‘Asahi’ with the lie of her friend being taken away by the Nation of the Dragon King to incite her desire to go to war with them. They also exiled anyone who was opposed to it. In Nadasha, they don’t worship spirits. Instead, they worship their own god and are extremely devout, meaning the power of the church is strong. That being said, not believing in their Priestess Princess, summoned from another world, is practically the same as not believing in god. Then, conveniently enough, the priests were suddenly unable to use magic. The priests proclaimed it was because of the non-believers of the Priestess Princess and used the opportunity to exile the moderates. People started to convert into proponents and true believers of the Priestess Princess, which helped force the opponents of the concept into submission.”

After hearing Chelsie's explanation, Ruri felt her skin crawl. She looked at Chelsie's face and said awkwardly, "Then... that is mostly my fault..."

They'd talked Asahi into inciting a war by using her "friend" being taken away by the Nation of the Dragon King. Whatever lies they'd concocted—that "friend" was obviously Ruri.

And the priests being unable to use magic was part of the revenge that the spirits thought they were enacting on Ruri's behalf. Ruri was shocked that the spirit strike that happened because of her offhanded comment could trigger such a major event.

"Perhaps that did set the whole thing into motion, but the result was inevitable with or without you, Ruri. This was the King and his court's design all along, after all."

"But if that whole thing with them not being able to use their magic never happened, then those people wouldn't have been fed to the beasts of the forest, right?" In Ruri's mind echoed the mean-spirited laughs of the King and the Head Priest speaking about the current status of the moderates, assaulting her with immense feelings of guilt.

"No need to worry about that. I wouldn't just let them dispose of the valuable few with heads on their shoulders. When they were exiled to the forest, I took them under my custody and sent them to the Capital of the Dragon King. So you don't need to harbor any guilt over any of that, Ruri."

Ruri felt keenly relieved upon hearing that they were safe. Even though they were complete strangers, she would feel horrible if her actions had led to their deaths, however inadvertently.

"I'm sure that they'll be entrusted with Nadasha after they overthrow the current king. So... what are you going to do, Ruri?"

"Huh?"

"You said something about wanting to beat up the people you were summoned with and the Nadashians, didn't you? I wouldn't think you'd be too hard on the people summoned since they're just being used as puppets, but the King needs strict punishment, so you'd better seek council with the Dragon King

right away.”

“I do feel like blowing a gasket over what they did, but I can’t even consider that a real option at this point—I don’t know, it’s complicated.” She still felt shocked by the truth—she was brought to this world not in order to bring prosperity to a nation but for the selfish desires of those in power corrupted by greed and their own self-interest.

“What has you feeling so down, Ruri?”

“‘What has me feeling so down?’ I was summoned here because people wanted an excuse to start a war, wasn’t I?! You said that anyone else would have worked, so, of course, it makes me think—why me?!”

“You’re not only not from Nadasha, but not of this world. So from your perspective, no matter *what* their reasons might’ve been, that doesn’t change the fact that they brought you over here against your will, does it?”

“That’s true...”

Be it for war or to provide help to people, it didn’t change the fact that Ruri was in no way at fault for any of this and was cast into the forest under false charges.

Thinking that calmed her down slightly.

But only slightly. She had finally grown accustomed to life in this world and her attachment for her own world had grown weak, but the disturbing and greed-driven conversation between the King and the Head Priest had rekindled it. Unable to contain herself, she once again flopped down atop the desk.

“But I can’t help but think. Think that if it didn’t have to be Asahi or me, then if I had left my house just ten, no, *five* minutes later, then things would be different now. Why did I turn around to look at Asahi instead of rushing onto campuuuus?!”

“Well, that’s an understandable train of thought.”

Ruri pounded her hands against the desk in utter frustration.

Normally, when a path to this world was opened, it wasn’t big enough for

people to travel through. The path should have only been big enough to make something small and unnoticeable disappear—like a pebble near Ruri’s foot. The Nadashian summoners had intentionally made the path bigger after they’d opened it and designated a room in the castle as its exit. But, not only was it not guaranteed that they’d get anything through to their side, it wasn’t even guaranteed that it would be a *person* if they did.

Luckily for them, the Head Priest of Nadasha was, despite his rather twisted personality, in a class of his own. Through tireless research, he refined his process until he could open a path directly to spots with a high concentration of people by targeting their lifeforce.

The victims of the glorious first run of this technique were none other than Ruri and co.

Ruri just so happened to collide with the path to this world. It was just the right day, in just the right place, at just the right time... a stroke of astronomical bad luck—luck so bad that even Chelsie was hard-pressed to provide any sort of follow-up explanation. Pointing out Ruri’s bad luck any further, however, would feel like kicking someone when they’re down, so Chelsie kept it to herself.

That was when the spirits, who had been quietly listening in on Ruri and Chelsie’s conversation, worriedly asked Ruri a question.

“Ruri, do you hate this world? You don’t have fun here?”

“I do have fun. I’ve always dreamed of a life free of Asahi’s annoyances, and with Chelsie-san and all of you in my corner, every day is filled with fun and happiness. But as much fun as it is, I still want to see my family. The thought of not being able to see them again hurts.” In the past, Ruri would have never thought that she would miss her parents so much at her age. She might have once been a child with separation issues, but she couldn’t deny her desire to see her parents now. The spirits didn’t seem to understand that sentiment.

As a doleful expression came over Ruri’s face, the conversation she’d eavesdropped on suddenly popped into her mind.

“...Oh! That’s right. They said that they could just call forth a new person if they needed to. If I investigate that, I bet I could figure out some kind of way to get back to the other side!”

Joy shot back onto Ruri's face upon discovering this ray of hope, but the spirits were quick to strike it down.

"That won't work. You can come from over there, but anyone with a physical body can't pass through the boundary from here to there."

"Once you come over here, you can't go back. No way, no how."

"Mm-hmm, no how!"

"Shooting it down, just like that..." After having this answer to the question that she'd agonized over for the past few years shot down in an instant, she looked at the spirits with a forlorn expression and flopped back on the desk. "My last *hooooope!*"

In spite of all the hard hours she spent researching a way back home at the capital library, in spite of having tutors teach her to read a new language, she was being told that all that effort was meaningless by a crowd of tiny, smiling faces.

The pent-up rage, sadness, and other emotions she had been keeping inside finally exploded. Leaving her at least a *morsel* of hope was all that she was asking for.

"Just give up and settle down in this world. Anyway, what are you going to do about Nadasha?"

Ruri had almost forgotten. She brought the slightly derailed conversation back on track.

"There are a lot of people in Nadasha who are going along with the war because the Priestess Princess is in support of it, yes? And since Asahi is their figurehead, all one would have to do is change her mind, right? If she agreed with the war only after being led to believe that the Nation of the Dragon King abducted me, then if we just told her that that was a lie she would lose her reason for going to war in the first place. Even if the King and the Priest still want to go to war, if the Priestess Princess they've picked refuses, they won't be able to incite war right away, at the very least," Ruri suggested. She thought this was a sound idea, but Chelsie slowly shook her head in response.

"The moderates that had been keeping war from breaking out this whole time

are nearly gone from Nadasha. Even telling Asahi the truth now wouldn't help to change the situation. The war is unavoidable. Anyway, you would need to go directly to Asahi to tell her that she's been lied to. It seems unlikely that she'd believe a third party telling her that you hadn't been kidnapped. You're opposed to the idea of going to see Asahi, aren't you?"

"Ungh, I know. I am 'opposed'—I mean, I downright hate the idea—but I really don't want war to break out. It's true that it might be impossible to stop it at this point, but if I don't do something Asahi will end up involved, won't she?"

"Most likely. According to Joshua, she's pretty gung-ho about getting you back, so I'm guessing she'll come to get you personally."

"But it's a war. People will be taking each other's lives... Honestly, knowing Asahi, she probably doesn't even realize that. If I don't stop her, she might die." In fact, remembering the King and the Head Priest's conversation, they were entirely prepared to eliminate her along with the Prince. Chances were that she'd end up getting killed not even by the war itself but by the very people she considered her allies. That meant just staying in Nadasha in and of itself was dangerous for her.

"I'm surprised to hear *you* showing concern for Asahi. I thought you disliked her so much that you didn't even want her near you?"

"Sure, but I'm not cold enough to think it's okay if she dies. She is technically my childhood friend—albeit reluctantly..."

"So what do you plan on doing now?"

"I'm going to Nadasha to convince Asahi not to take part in this war. Even if Asahi disagrees and the war proceeds, it might buy some time until war actually breaks out."

As depressing as it was, Ruri had no other choice but to go to Nadasha, straighten out this misunderstanding and convince Asahi not to participate in the war!

"But I can't let you pull something as dangerous as sneaking into Castle Nadasha," Chelsie said, clearly concerned. It was only natural that the castle would be heavily guarded, which meant there was no guarantee that she could

make it to Asahi safely. Not even going in cat form ensured that nothing would happen, and it was going to be bad news if she were caught.

“Well, I have the spirits with me and I can turn into a cat while I’m sneaking around, so I can go undetected.” Ruri argued this to give Chelsie some peace of mind.

“Your spirit entourage is a world of worries on its own, though.”

“Well, I can’t deny that...” The concern about the spirits taking drastic measures for revenge if anything should happen to Ruri remained an issue. “But it will be just fine. I will make sure to warn the spirits to not get involved.”

Chelsie breathed a sigh of resignation, realizing that any further attempts to dissuade Ruri were futile.

“If that’s what you want to do, then give it your best shot. I will just tell you to be careful. If you feel that you’re in danger, come back immediately.”

“I will.” Ruri was fired up and ready to charge into Nadasha right away until...

“Ruri, Lady Lydia is calling you~”

“Huh? Lydia?” Ruri opened up her pocket space to answer the call. There a sulky and dissatisfied Lydia was waiting for her.

“What’s wrong, Lydia?”

“Don’t you ‘what’s wrong’ me. Now, Ruri, I don’t mind you going to the royal capital, but you haven’t come to visit me at all since.”

Ruri couldn’t deny that she might have been neglecting visiting Lydia as of late. While it could be considered an excuse, she spent the majority of her time either working at the diner or by Jade’s side, which didn’t give her any opportunity to enter the pocket space. But since there was no way that Lydia would have known her situation, she probably thought that Ruri simply abandoned her. Ruri felt honestly sorry after seeing Lydia so unhappy.

“I thought you were enjoying the capital so much that you forgot about me.”

“I’m sorry, Lydia. I didn’t forget about you.”

“It’s fine. You can repay me by having a tea party with me right now.”

“No... I would like to break for tea, but now isn’t the time. There’s someplace that I have to go,” declined Ruri, looking apologetic.

“Where?”

“Nadasha,” replied Ruri. Then she gave a simple explanation about the events in Nadasha, the potential war, and all the things concerning Asahi.

“Oh, I see. That sounds like a lot to handle. Can I do anything to help?”

“Thanks, but I can’t always depend on you and the other spirits to do everything, so I want to try as best as I can on my own. I’m going off to persuade Asahi. It needs to be me that talks to her.” A part of Ruri was also worried that Lydia or the spirits would take drastic measures if she carelessly asked them for help.

“I see. Good luck, then. Once you handle your business, we’ll have another tea party. I’ll be praying for your success.”

“Yup, I’ll give it my all!”

Chapter 22: The Reunion

Ruri parted ways with Lydia, left Chelsie's house, and returned, at last, to Castle Nadasha. She waited for nightfall since it would be less conspicuous than walking around in the day, changed into cat form, and snuck inside via the castle walls.

Soldiers were stationed everywhere, but as a cat and shrouded in darkness, none of them paid Ruri any mind, allowing her to casually stroll through the castle's garden. Due to the people of this nation possessing low mana, they didn't seem able to see the spirits hanging around Ruri either.

Once she'd climbed a tree and hid herself, she employed a wind spirit to help search for Asahi's room. Deciding that, even in cat form, it would be too hard for her to get into the room from the inside with the combination of soldiers and random people going to and fro around the interior of the castle, she jumped onto the balcony and used that as her entry point instead. After making it underneath the room, she used wind magic to fly all the way up to the balcony.

Ruri took a quick look around to make sure the coast was clear before getting the spirits to take off her bracelet and reverting to human form.

Slightly nervous, she opened the balcony door and brushed back the curtains to find Asahi's eyes filled with fear and tension clashing with her own. It seemed as though she was freaked out over the intruder suddenly in her room, but as soon as she saw it was Ruri, her eyes opened wide in disbelief. Her fear was eliminated, replaced with shock.

"Ruri-chan!" Asahi stretched out her arms to glomp Ruri, overcome with joy—which Ruri quickly slid to the side to avoid. She hadn't come here to have a touching reunion. In fact, Ruri was only here out of absolute necessity...

That dodge left Asahi looking rather disappointed, but the joy from Ruri being in her room quickly filled her heart and a smile stretched across her face.

“Ruri-chan, I’m so glad! When I heard you got abducted, I was worried sick!” Although Asahi seemed to be genuinely happy, she suddenly felt the difference in enthusiasm levels upon taking a look at Ruri’s face compared to hers.

“That’s what I came here to talk about,” Ruri stated, doing a quick scan of the room and putting up a quick barrier so that their voices wouldn’t attract unwanted attention. After confirming that the barrier was set firmly in place, she turned back to Asahi a little more at ease. She didn’t intend on sticking around long and got straight to the point.

“I don’t know what these people have been feeding you, but I wasn’t abducted.”

“Huh? But the King said that...”

“That was a *lie*. Them bringing us to this world was the abduction, so these aren’t the type of people whose words you should be taking at face value.”

“But none of the people here would ever do anything dishonest...”

“They *would* and they *have*!” exclaimed Ruri, her tone naturally getting forceful remembering the time the Prince and her former classmates framed her for attempted murder.

“The Prince and those four who were summoned to this world along with us? Well, they kicked me out by pinning a crime on me. And the King and the Head Priest knew, blaming it on the Nation of the Dragon King instead! They tricked you into believing them.”

“That can’t be...”

“So, yeah, there’s no need to go to war with the Nation of the Dragon King. They didn’t abduct me, and you should step down from this Priestess Princess thing, too.”

However, telling her to step down as Priestess Princess meant that she wouldn’t be able to stay in Nadasha. She could easily imagine the King and the Head Priest disposing of whatever or whoever they deemed useless to their schemes.

In that case, she needed to consider where she would put Asahi up, which

would be another job for Joshua. She would have him look for a place where she could be a live-in worker. However, as she planned all of this in her head, she remembered something important.

The King and the Head Priest had talked about eliminating Asahi in the midst of the war and summoning the next Priestess Princess. So if Asahi were to leave this place now, they would just summon up the next sacrificial lamb to take her place. And if she suggested they stop the war, then Asahi would be in danger before the war even started...

(Crap, I should have talked that over with Chelsie-san when I had the chance.)
Ruri had accomplished telling Asahi that she hadn't been abducted, but she now realized that she hadn't made any plans on how to handle Asahi after that deed was done.

(Maybe I should head back for now and reassess my options with Chelsie-san.)
Ruri was just about to turn around in order to come back later, but that was when she heard Asahi deliver a chipper comment that betrayed her expectations.

"Oh, Ruri-chan, if you got into a little fight, you should have just told me."

"I... *excuse me?*" Ruri was dumbfounded by Asahi's seemingly nonsensical comment.

"If you had just told me, I could have helped you patch things up."

Ruri looked at Asahi like some sort of unidentified lifeform speaking gibberish.

"But it's okay. The Prince and everyone else are so nice that I'm sure you can patch things up if you just talk everything out."

Ruri finally deciphered what it was the girl was trying to say and her shoulders slumped, crestfallen.

She thought she'd relayed the message, but she realized that it hadn't been received at all. It reminded her of something similar that happened back in middle school when she was still classmates with the four others.

In middle school, Asahi would dote over Ruri, but Ruri had started to get bullied by Asahi's followers far past simple insults. Of course, she wasn't the

type to take that sort of treatment lying down and gave her bullies the appropriate comeuppance, but it was still a lousy experience to go through. Fed up, Ruri told Asahi, the root cause of the entire ordeal, to put a stop to her followers' actions, thinking that Asahi delivering the message personally would be the most effective way to deal with them. After hearing her suggestion, however, Asahi smiled and brushed it aside, saying, "You guys are really hitting it off, huh?"

It seemed as though Asahi could only perceive the sight of her followers bullying Ruri as some kind of playful roughhousing with one another. This obviously made Ruri upset, and despite her repeatedly insisting that it was bullying and not horseplay, Ruri's pleas never got through to Asahi. The idea of the followers, who treated *her* so kindly, ever bullying or harassing someone was simply inconceivable.

This total breakdown in communication left Ruri floored and served as a harsh reminder of why Ruri stopped trying to have any meaningful conversations with Asahi. It seemed as though nothing had changed.

She'd assumed that Asahi had grown a bit after two years of living in an unfamiliar world, but her difficulty picking up on context clues—or rather, her complete *lack* of basic comprehension—remained completely unchanged.

Asahi was exactly as she had always been.

"Were you *listening* to what I *just* said?! At what point in all of that did you get the idea that we got into a '*little fight*'?!"

"Ruri-chan, why are you getting angry?" Asahi asked in blank surprise, stirring the sense of resignation within Ruri once more.

(No, I blame myself for being stupid enough to expect anything more from Asahi. This is the same girl that was duped so easily, after all...) Even if you discounted the two years that they weren't together, she had stopped trying to speak with Asahi a long time ago, so to try again after such a long time was making Ruri feel weary. Even so, it was essential that she hammer this point home to her.

"Listen, I'm going to tell you one more time, so clean out your ears. I have *not* been abducted by the Nation of the Dragon King. You don't need to try to

extract me from there, so you don't need to take part in this war either."

"But... I already said that I would. They said that if I take part as the Priestess Princess, it will elevate everyone's fighting spirit. I'm the Priestess Princess, so I have to work toward the prosperity of the land."

"The Priestess Princess itself is a lie concocted by the King and the Priest! Do you even understand what taking part in a war actually *means*?! War means bloodshed between two factions. There's no way that you're capable of something like that! Well, are you?!"

"It'll be alright. I'll just watch from the sidelines, and the Prince and the soldiers promised they'll protect me."

How in the world could one person be so blindly optimistic? It was possibly a result of never being in a lick of danger since coming to this world that allowed her to so casually say that things would be all right.

As Ruri saw Asahi assure her nothing would go wrong with a big grin on her face, she realized that Asahi's sense of impending crisis was nonexistent. She should try getting abandoned in the forest sometime to see how that feels; that would be sure to bring her vigilance levels to new heights.

"Your look on war is naive! This isn't playtime, and this isn't like facing someone in a video game. People take up *real* weapons and inflict *real* pain on one another. You aren't capable of doing something like that, are you, Asahi? You're not going to be able to *just watch*!" Ruri had never witnessed war unfold either, but she could perceive the danger just off of imagination alone, which made Asahi's carefree display all the more baffling.

In Ruri's case, she had seen the ruined towns of Nadasha along the way here, instilling her with an overwhelming sense of crisis. Children sat hungry and without food on the ragged streets with all able-bodied men being taken away under the fear of execution. This nation's conduct was ruthless.

If she could bring Asahi to that town, then she would be just as shocked as Ruri by the unreal and tragic sight of it all. Ruri felt that doing that might actually sow the seeds of distrust toward the King, the cause of the townspeople's distress. It wasn't just one town either—all of them looked like that. Since she had seen the lively scenery of the Nation of the Dragon King, the

terrible shape of Nadasha pained her heart even more.

Despite the two nations both having kings, a king as highly trusted by his people as Jade would never allow for such a town to exist. A bad king having that much influence over the citizen's lives was eye opening, filling Ruri with resentment toward Nadasha's ruler.

If Asahi was going to go ahead with starting a war after being tricked by the King and Priest, then it was safe to say that those two were equally guilty. Ruri felt a strong desire to stop this in any way she could build within her.

"Don't trust the King and the Priest. The majority of what they're telling you are lies. They're just going to manipulate you and get you killed. They plan on using you until they fulfill their goals and then killing you along with the Prince and everyone else. I overheard them talking about it myself!"



Ruri wasn't sure if Asahi was really listening to what she was saying. She didn't seem to get it going by the look on her face, but Ruri continued on, determined.

"Think about it *carefully*. Our world might be safe, but the rules in this world are different. You need to protect yourself. I don't think you can ever be too careful, especially *you*, Asahi. If you don't want to die, *don't* participate in this war." Asahi might've been confused. Her Bewitch powers assured her that she lived surrounded by people who loved her, so she probably never even thought about someone trying to inflict harm on her.

Not even Ruri herself ever considered she would be entangled with such crooked people, but it was the truth.

At any rate, she had said her piece, and while she wasn't sure how Asahi would take it, it was clear that Asahi needed to consider her options for the immediate future. It was probably difficult for her to provide an answer right away. Even Ruri wanted to discuss with Chelsie about what they should do about Asahi moving forward, so she decided to pack it up for today.

"I'll be going back now."

"Huh? 'Going back'? Where are you going, Ruri-chan?!"

"I'm leaving Nadasha."

"I'm coming with you! I don't want to be separated from you anymore, Ruri-chan!" Asahi locked her arm around Ruri's like a spoiled child.

Just as Ruri wished that Asahi would just give it a rest, the terrible feeling of something coiling around her body overcame her and she reflectively pushed Asahi's arm away.

Asahi's eyes widened in surprise, but Ruri was also visibly shaken after brushing Asahi off.

(What... was that?)

She looked at her arm, covered with goosebumps of discomfort. The coiling sense of unease was still with her, and upon further inspection, she realized that it was mana. It wasn't her mana either; someone else's mana was

practically wrapped around her. Ruri didn't need to think much to know who it belonged to. Ruri and Asahi were the only two people in the room, after all.

That was when it all clicked for Ruri—this was what the Bewitch magic did.

Every time that Asahi was being adamant in her demands she would probably use her mana to perform a Bewitchment spell on anyone and everyone just like she was doing now.

The reason that Ruri was able to sense it now was because she had learned to both use magic and sense mana. Realizing that she'd had mana wrapped around her like this her whole life wasn't a comfortable thought—no matter how ineffective Asahi's Bewitchment proved against her. She now had a very good reason not to want to come near Asahi, outside of her actions and words.

"Ruri-chan, I'm coming with you!" As Asahi made her desperate appeal, Ruri looked at her, thinking that her desperation to be with Ruri was because of her own mana compatibility.

Asahi didn't know that herself, however, and although Ruri figured that Asahi couldn't help but cling to her, it was a problem that would have been avoided if she could just communicate that fact to her. She was sure that even if she told her that mana was the cause, Asahi wouldn't take staving off seeing Ruri just because it was intrusive as an option. After all, this was the same girl that had been pampered because of her Bewitchment power and never had to settle for less a day in her life.

"Hey, Asahi, what do you think our relationship is?"

"Well, we're best friends, of course," replied Asahi, as if it were obvious.

"In that case... you need to listen to what your best friend is saying."

"But I am listening."

"Back when I was getting bullied before and even now—it's the same old story. You may be listening to what I'm saying, but you're not believing the message I'm conveying. When I was being bullied, you explained it as me 'hitting things off' with my bullies. I get framed and exiled, you explain it as me having a 'little fight' with the Prince. You just won't wrap your head around the words that come out of my mouth. You say that we're 'best friends,' but when

I'm in trouble, you don't even attempt to understand or help me. Is *that* what you call being a best friend?" Asahi was about to interject, but Ruri continued on, regardless. "I don't need a 'best friend' like that. Well, in any case, I haven't been abducted by the Nation of the Dragon King. That's all I came to tell you. That being said, think carefully on what I said and make the appropriate call."

Those were Ruri's parting remarks as she jumped out of the window.

She could hear Asahi yelling her name, "Ruri-chan!" from behind her, but she kept her eyes forward and disappeared into the darkness.

After turning back into a cat, she exited the castle, making sure that she didn't run into anyone along the way.

"Are you done, Ruri?"

"Yup, let's go back to Chelsie-san's house." Ruri was exhausted yet relieved that she'd managed to shake free of Asahi. She came, said what she needed to say, and even warned her about not participating in the war. But she knew Asahi, and she knew that she'd never been able to have any sort of meaningful conversation with her in the past. Though her intent was to give her a clear explanation, she was a tad worried that nothing had actually got through to her.

Ruri could only hope that Asahi would stew on her warning and give the matter at least a little serious consideration.

There were also her former classmates to consider. No matter how much of a grip Asahi's Bewitchment powers had over them, they probably didn't share Asahi's level of optimism. Ruri hoped that she would realize the danger of this war through their reactions to it.

Chapter 23: The Return

Ruri returned to the forest with a tinge of worry still in the back of her mind. She stood in front of the entrance of Chelsie's house, took a deep sigh, and went inside. In the living room, Chelsie sat in a chair sipping a cup of tea.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you."

"Did you manage to talk with her?"

"Well, yes and no..." Ruri sat down in the chair across from Chelsie and told her about the confrontation with Asahi. Upon hearing the whole story, Chelsie's face made a rather dubious expression.

"I've heard stories about this girl many times, but... she's a little off, isn't she?"

"A little' nothing! I was thrown into the forest and forced to fend for my life and she just tries to pass it off as me getting into a 'little fight'? That is simply unbearable!" That whole ordeal wasn't something that could be passed off as a "simple little fight." She was framed for a crime she didn't commit! She was kicked by soldiers! She was forced to go all survivalist in the forest! The anger toward that soldier that had kicked her still remained fresh in her memory.

"Not being able to communicate the point to her is a pretty big issue."

"You can say that again. I would like to take a look inside that head of hers to see how she heard what I said and concluded that a spat was to blame." Ruri had calmed down slightly after venting her frustrations and asked Chelsie, "Chelsie-san, telling Asahi that I wasn't abducted is all well and good, but if it does change her mind and she opposes the war, then the King won't get a chance to eliminate her, right? Although, I'm afraid that if Asahi doesn't comply and they're unable to go to war, they'll just end up summoning more people to get their next Priestess Princess."

"That is a likely possibility. But they can't do much of anything right away.

Asahi is already well-known as the Priestess Princess. Claiming that they got the wrong person would give rise to suspicion and, anyway, they can't conduct another summoning right away. That only works when a path between the two worlds is open, so they'll need time to prepare. Even if Asahi was to suddenly go against the war, the King and Priest would first try to persuade her into reconsidering. This will buy us some time until the war starts."

Ruri breathed a sigh of relief. While it didn't completely eliminate her fears, they seemed to be unnecessary for the time being.

"You said you talked to her, but did she accept what you said as fact?" Asked Chelsie.

"She gave me a bit of the runaround, but after everything I told her I'm sure she is *at least* thinking about it." Ruri couldn't explain it any more simply than how she had. As dim as Asahi was, even she probably felt some distrust sprout up over Ruri saying she wasn't abducted. Plus, she was a grown adult! She should have enough intelligence to think on her own...

Asahi may have tried to brush off what the Prince and the others did to her as the result of an argument, but it was likely that Ruri's persuasive lecture made an impression. Considering that, even discounting the two years they'd spent in this world, it was the first time Ruri had actually tried to speak to Asahi in several years. What they needed to consider now was how to handle Asahi going forward.

"Last thing, I'm wondering where we should put Asahi in the immediate future. Also, there is the issue of needing to extract her from Nadasha if she does turn against the war."

"That is a matter for other people to solve, not you."

"Do you think so?"

"Even more importantly, shouldn't you be getting back to the capital soon?"

"Why is that?" Ruri asked, clueless as Chelsie smiled wryly, stood up and disappeared off somewhere. She returned shortly with a stack of papers in her hands, presenting them to Ruri and taking her seat once again.

Ruri scanned the papers to find some kind of letters written on them, but

seeing as how Ruri was still a beginner at this world's language, she had no way of telling what precisely was written on them. While there were some parts she could make out, they weren't much.

"What are these?"

"They're letters checking on if you've come here. Claus has been asking me a few times every day. Ruri, did you not tell them that you were going out before you left?" Chelsie asked, exasperated.

"I did tell them. Though I did write a letter instead of telling them verbally."

Chelsie knew of Ruri's reading and writing capabilities, so she had her doubts.

"How did you write a letter yourself when you don't have enough reading comprehension for those letters there?"

"Well, I strung together some of the vocabulary I know..." Ruri recalled the letter and how it most likely got the general point across, but she hadn't yet realized that it had unfortunately been interpreted in a different manner.

"This is what happens when you leave a note with a mastery of only very basic vocabulary. The royal capital is in an uproar about you running away."

"Huh? '*Running away*'?!"

"I told them that you haven't run away and that you came here after you arrived, but this time, I'm getting a multitude of letters addressed to you from His Majesty. And Claus has been sending letters non-stop asking that you hurry back home."

"What did Jade-sama say?"

"It's mostly along the lines of, 'If I did something to upset you, then tell me and I'll improve myself, so please just come home.'"

"Jade-sama..." Ruri had finally caught on to the fact that she had caused people to worry over her.

"I was told that all of His Majesty's aides together managed to stop him from coming here himself to retrieve you. Now, hurry on back and put his mind at ease."

“Yes, ma’am,” Ruri replied, but it was already late at night. She had Chelsie teach her the words needed to write a letter telling them that she would leave tomorrow morning and sent it via the water tray.

She spent the night at Chelsie’s house and departed in the early morning.

“Right, I’ll be off now.”

“Don’t be a stranger.”

Ruri then flew off in the direction of the royal capital. After flying for a while, something suddenly popped into her mind.

“Oh yeah, I haven’t seen Kotaro around for a bit. I wonder where he’s gotten off to?” Ruri said to herself, pondering the fact that she couldn’t find Kotaro, who usually popped up whenever she was around.

It was too late to turn around now, though, so she put the matter of Kotaro on the back-burner and headed straight for the royal capital.



Ruri made her way back to the royal capital through several towns, then turned back into a cat and headed toward Jade’s office. Since she had no way of opening the office door as a cat, she scratched on it to signal her arrival.

The door opened inward with little time wasted, and within an instant Ruri felt her whole perspective on the world change, making her eyes bulge wide. This was because Jade had scooped her up off the floor. Within Jade’s arms, her eyes met his greenish-blue ones.

“Jade-sama...”

“Ruri, where in the world did you go? And you leaving that note behind... It was bound to make me worry.”

“I apologize, Jade-sama. I never intended for you to be this worried over me...”

“I would obviously be worried if you up and left. From now on, just speak to me directly. I was so worried that I couldn’t concentrate on anything.”

“I will,” Ruri replied as she looked into the room to see Claus sighing in relief.

Chelsie had mentioned that all of Jade’s aides were restraining him, so the

relief at Ruri coming back was warranted. Ruri had never thought that her note might be misinterpreted as a running-away note or that Jade would cause this much of an uproar. She felt extremely sorry for the burden she'd placed on Claus and the others.

"I am truly glad that you have come back to the castle. His Majesty spoke of 'picking you up' despite not knowing your whereabouts, so it was quite the task to prevent him from doing so."

"I am sorry for that, Claus-san."

"You needn't apologize. I am just glad that you did not leave permanently. If you actually did leave for good, His Majesty would have become completely incapable of carrying out his duties. That said, whenever he doesn't know your whereabouts, he *does* find it hard to concentrate and his work piles up quite a bit." Claus turned his attention toward Jade, commenting with a grin, "But now it seems that you can make fine progress, so I would suggest that you get started on your workload."

Jade seemed to understand the tenor of this statement, replying to him with a sour face "Yes, I get it."

Realizing that she would get in the way of his work, Ruri tried to slip out of Jade's arms. But when she tried, instead of letting go Jade squeezed even harder, preventing her from jumping down from his arms. When she looked up, there was Jade's face—in all its displeased glory.

"Where do you think *you're* going?"

"Um, I thought I would leave the room because I'd interrupt your work."

"No. You stay here. How many days do you think you were gone? A quick hug won't be enough to heal what ails me," said Jade as he returned to his seat with Ruri in his arms, placing her on the usual position on his lap. And with that, the mighty Dragon King was on cloud nine.

"Um, Jade-sama? Wouldn't keeping me on your lap distract you?" Ruri knew that, if the roles were reversed, it would surely distract *her*. Regardless of her cat form being small, it *had* to get heavy having her on your lap the entire time.

"It's no problem. In fact, if you went off to where I couldn't see you, it would

make me more worried and I'd come to a standstill with my work."

"Hmm, is that how it works?"

"That's how it works."

Ruri looked at Claus to confirm that this was indeed the okay thing to do, but Claus only gave a wry smile in response. He even went so far as to approve of Jade's behavior—a far cry from suggesting Ruri leave the room. "His Majesty is in a much better mood this way and makes more progress with his workload, so I ask you to please stay there for the time being."

Since that seemed to be the plan, Ruri found a comfortable spot and curled up on his lap.

A satisfied look came over Jade's face as he looked at Ruri's balled-up body. He lightly patted Ruri's head before getting started on squaring away the mountain of documents stacked on his desk. The sounds of shifting papers and a scribbling pen echoed throughout the silent room.

These sounds were oddly relaxing to Ruri as she realized just how drained she felt from her conversation with Asahi. She finally felt like herself again back at Jade's extremely comfortable side.

Jade would stroke Ruri's head to comfort himself as he worked, which made Ruri squint and smile in glee.

It didn't just happen once or twice either—it happened so many times that it made her worry he wasn't actually getting any work done. But since his one hand was petting Ruri and the other hand was holding his pen and moving unimpeded, she assumed that he must be working.

Claus, who was behaving as if he was on surveillance duty, was silent with a good-natured smile on his face, which clued Ruri in that Jade was progressing at an excellent pace.

Ruri wished she could assist him, but considering that her skill at reading their language was pretty dubious, she probably couldn't really help him with anything. Although, that gave her the idea that maybe she could help with smaller things he might need.

“Jade-sama, is there anything I can assist you with?”

His pen paused and Jade looked down at Ruri on his lap and grinned. “I appreciate the sentiment. You staying right here is all I need from you.”

“Um, okay...” It seemed as though she wasn’t going to be very useful as a cat — a fact that slightly distressed Ruri.



As Ruri sat quietly atop Jade’s lap as to not get in his way, she thought about the King and Head Priest of Nadasha.

Not only did they summon a handful of unrelated individuals just so they could eventually go to war, but in an act of brazen selfishness, they chucked Ruri into the forest because she interfered with their designs.

She couldn’t forget her resentment from back then, even if she tried. No matter how much of Asahi’s Bewitchment powers were on them, she could never forgive what the Prince of Nadasha and her former classmates had done to her. But Ruri naturally saved her greatest resentment for two people and two people alone—the King and the Head Priest.

She probably would have been making new friends and enjoying the splendors of her college life right around now, but those two stole all of that away from her. They were people who thought of other people as nothing more than tools. If they wanted to go to war so badly, they should have just done it on their own and not gotten innocent people embroiled in their plots—Ruri wanted to shout that right into their faces.

(Just wait and see. I’ll get my revenge on you all!) After being tossed into that forest, anyone would believe that Ruri was dead. They probably never even dreamed that she would be living as healthy and comfortably as she was right now. The next time they met was going to be delicious. They were going to be so shocked they wouldn’t be able to stand up straight. Just imagining the looks on their faces brought a grin to her face.

Ruri wasn’t going to let them do whatever it was they pleased; she was going to thoroughly trounce their plans and, some day, slam her fist right into their smug faces.

What a treat that day was going to be.

Ruri renewed her determination as the faces of those she hated popped into her head.

Several days later, Nadasha declared war against the Nation of the Dragon King—an act that essentially meant that Ruri’s lecture proved meaningless.

She’d gone so far as to sneak into Castle Nadasha in order to help Asahi in spite of the dangers, which made the cut of betrayal hurt that much more.

No, perhaps attempting to make Asahi understand was a mistake from the get-go. But did she really relay anything too difficult to understand...? She simply said that she wasn’t abducted by the Nation of the Dragon King and not to trust the King or the Head Priest.

Asahi wouldn’t have motivation if Ruri hadn’t been abducted. She said that she needed to participate in the war as the Priestess Princess, but did *none* of the unscrupulous things she told her about the King get through to her?

This declaration of war was quick... a little too quick.

Even if Asahi was ultimately talked into going through with it, she’d thought what she’d done would at least stall the decision slightly, but this was far outside the realm of her expectations.

It meant that not a single one of Ruri’s sentiments resonated with Asahi, and despite telling her to be wary of the situation, she wasn’t wary at all and continued to blindly do as she was told.

Asahi had to understand what this meant. She had to understand that the start of this war meant the day had come—the day where the King and the Head Priest would carry out their plot to eliminate her during the chaos of the war.

“That no-good *idiot*! You could have held out for a little longer, for God’s sake!” Ruri screamed at the top of her lungs, but that scream wouldn’t reach all the way to the far-off Land of Nadasha—and neither would Ruri’s resentment.

To be continued...

Bonus Short Story

By Any Means Necessary

In her customary cat form, Ruri trotted behind Jade as he made his way to the royal office.

As soon as they entered the room, however, Jade stopped dead in his tracks, and Ruri looked up at him in confusion.

“Is something the matter, Jade-sama?”

“Not again...” Jade said, putting his hand on his head as his face crinkled up in disgust, leaving Ruri baffled.

Ruri turned her eyes toward the interior of the office to find Jade’s desk occupied by a mountain of thin books.

“What are all those?”

Jade pushed aside the pile of little books, which were taking up valuable real estate on his desk, and breathed a heavy sigh. Ruri opened one of the books with great interest and a portrait of a girl greeted her. She proceeded to open the other books one after another. Each book contained the portrait of a different girl.

“Jade-sama, what are all of these?”

“...Portraits of marriage candidates,” he said, not even trying to hide his malcontent. They were probably all brought here by the elders who badger Jade to get married, and never learn their lesson.

After a wretched glance over the mountain of portraits, Jade proceeded to start the day’s work.

“Huh? Don’t you need to look at them?”

“No point.”

“But there are a lot of pretty ladies here.” She looked through more of the portraits since she didn’t have anything in particular to do. Each girl featured was beautiful with immaculate features. Any one of them seemed more than fit to stand by Jade’s side. *“Look, especially this one. She’s a real beauty.”*

“No.” Jade flatly refused to humor the notion. It seemed that the elder vassals’ efforts were no more than unnecessary inconveniences for Jade. He didn’t give any of them so much as a passing glance. The portraits were disposed of like garbage, without the king laying eyes on a single one.

That night, she accompanied Jade to his room. While he was in the middle of lighting the lamps, Ruri jumped onto the bed. Once she did, she noticed something odd. There, in his bed, was a mass of what seemed to be a sleeping person under the sheets. Curious, she pulled back the comforter just as the lights turned on and she was able to get a good look.

Lying there was a voluptuous and beautiful girl in a very unladylike position.

“Gaaah, Jade-sama, Jade-sama!” Ruri gasped and yowled aloud out of panic.

“Ruri, what’s wrong?” Jade turned around upon hearing Ruri’s abnormal shriek, which is when he got an eyeful of the beautiful girl in his bed. He froze in place as if his brain had temporarily stopped working.

“Who is this person?!”

“I-I have no idea. Who are you?! How did you get into this room?!”

This was the king’s private quarters. This wasn’t supposed to be a place where any random person could just waltz in.

Cheeks flushed, the beautiful girl spoke up. “I was called upon by the honorable elder vassal to come and comfort Your Majesty.”

“Grk...” Jade clenched his fists and began to shake in what appeared to be rage.

The elders were probably getting desperate, since Jade refused to decide on a bride and never looked at the portraits they gave him, so they’d apparently employed a *less subtle* method.

“It seems that they’re finally using any means necessary, huh?”

The next day, the elders were thoroughly chewed out by Jade. But they refused to learn their lesson and could be seen huddled, hashing out their next secret plan, in the days that followed.

It looked like Jade's troubles were going to continue for a while—a *very* long while.



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The White Cat's Revenge as Plotted from the Dragon King's Lap: Volume 1

by Kureha

Translated by David Evelyn Edited by Hannah N. Carter

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